# 1

# Before 400 CE



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The Greek and Roman world was a Mediterranean one. The map shows the Roman Empire at its largest extension, in 117 CE.

Source: Map of the Roman Empire in 117/edmaps /https://edmaps.com/html/roman_empire_117.html

The picture shows reconstructed Roman papyrus scrolls, a work by Wolfgang Sauber. From the MOO Museum of Olive and Oil in Torgiano (Umbria).

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## Introduction

Europe extends from the Arctic Sea to the Mediterranean and from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains. A number of islands along its coasts also belong to Europe: Novaya Zemlya, Iceland, the British Isles, Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, Crete, and others. To the east and southeast, Europe's borders run along the eastern Ural Mountains, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea.

Europe in its modern geographical sense is however not really a relevant entity from a literary point of view during the early times treated in this chapter. Most of geographical Europe was inhabited by groups of people without writing, peoples known to us exclusively through archaeology or accounts by their southern neighbors. Only societies in Southern and Western Europe were literate before 400 CE. The history of literatures in Europe before 400 CE will therefore, inevitably, by and large be the literary history of Southern Europe.

The main protagonists of that history are the Greeks and the Romans. Between the early eighth and the early fourth century BCE, a rich and varied textual culture arose in Greece. Epic, lyric, and dramatic forms were cultivated, as well as a number of prose genres such as oratory, history, and philosophy. Many of these kinds of writing were then taken over by later Greek and Latin literature, while certain new genres were also introduced, all in an ongoing negotiation of changing social and cultural conditions. These various developments form the substance, or at least the warp, of our account of literature in Europe before 400 CE.

The Roman poet Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65–8 BCE) once wrote that poets wish to either profit us or please us, adding that poets who are able to mix the useful with the pleasant are the most successful of all, an adage that has often been repeated or varied in later European thinking about literature. It is no doubt true that what we now call literature can function as an invitation to reflection, or as entertainment, or both. What people are motivated to reflect on, and what entertains them, is not unconnected to the conditions in which they find themselves and their outlook on life. We do not underestimate the timelessness of great literature, its capacity to offer insight and pleasure to audiences that its authors never foresaw, but we also find it enlightening to relate literary texts to their times and cultures, viewing them against a historical backdrop. For that reason, we will offer a brief sketch of the general cultural context behind the ancient Greek and Latin literary texts before approaching the texts themselves.

When Europe first made its appearance on the historical scene, it was mainly inhabited by Indo-European peoples, just as it is today. Europeans spoke Greek, Italic, Celtic, or Germanic languages (while Slavonic

languages, an important component of the mix today, came into being somewhat later). Even though pockets of non-Indo-Europeans remained, like the now completely assimilated Etruscans in Italy (and although some modern European languages, such as Hungarian, Finnish, and Basque, are non-Indo-European), the Indo-European dominance in Europe is a fact and a very old fact. The Indo-Europeans may have come, originally, from the areas north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and spread out in several directions, but the exact origins of Indo-Europeans are disputed and of minor importance for literary history. It is worth pointing out, though, that several Iranian and Indic languages are also Indo-European, for example, Avestan, Sanskrit, and such modern languages as Persian, Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali.

Many researchers think that Greeks first arrived in present-day Greece at some point in prehistory not later than the mid-second millennium BCE. Crete, which long played an important part in the trade in the eastern Mediterranean, came under Greek dominance, and tablets in Greek, written in a script referred to as Linear B, have been uncovered in the ruins of the palaces in Crete and in political centers in mainland Greece like Mycenae; these tablets stem from the latter half of the second millennium. However, writing in Linear B, a script that later disappeared, was associated with economy and storekeeping and never literary in nature.

Like all civilizations before Modernity, Greek society was fundamentally agrarian. Yet trade already played a considerable role in western Asia and around the Mediterranean. Water-borne transport was easier than land-borne, so seas tended to bring the surrounding regions together rather than separating them. Greek culture expanded to islands in the Aegean Sea and to the west coast of Asia Minor. To the southeast, the shores of the Mediterranean were controlled by greater and more ancient powers – by Egypt and the more developed civilizations in western Asia – but the Greeks discovered new possibilities for trade and colonization to the west along the northern and, to some extent, also the southern coasts of the Mediterranean. In particular, Greek colonies grew up in southern Italy and Sicily and around the Black Sea. The Greeks developed into fine sailors, and they were in constant touch with other Greek settlements in the rather fragmented Greek-speaking world and with neighboring peoples.

The Greeks learned from, and competed with, several western Asian cultures. One very significant cultural import was writing, acquired anew, probably around 1000 BCE, from the Phoenicians, a Semitic people living in what is today Lebanon (and adjacent parts of Syria and Israel) and very active in Mediterranean trade. The Phoenicians had an alphabetic script based on consonants, to which the Greek added signs for vowels, which gave rise to the oldest forms of what is now the Greek alphabet. The Greek alphabet, in its turn, is behind all varieties of Cyrillic

script – for example, the one used for modern Russian – and was also, through Etruscan mediation, the model for the Latin alphabet.

While the older history of Greece remains rather obscure, we have a fairly good understanding of Greek society from around the eighth century BCE onwards. Greece (in Greek: *Hellas*) was not a nation but a swarm of small states in modern mainland Greece with colonies – which were, themselves, independent states – scattered across the larger Greek world sketched above. Typically, a Greek state consisted of a group of free men who inhabited a swathe of land with a town as its commercial and political center. Other inhabitants than the free indigenous men – their wives and children, their slaves, foreign residents, etc. – had no political rights. A state of this kind was called a *polis* (compare "politics," "police," etc.), which is normally translated as "city-state." What united these Greek city-states and made them constitute, together, a cultural sphere of its own, was their common Greek language (albeit split into different dialects), their common gods, and their common festivals. Two of the institutions of great importance for all Greeks were the Apollonian oracle at Delphi (Apollo was the god of prophecy and of poetry), where clients could have future events predicted, in verses that were often obscure, and the Olympic Games, thought to have been held every four years since 776 BCE in Olympia in the western Peloponnesus in honor of Zeus, the supreme god.

Music, song, and dance played a considerable role in ancient Greek society and often appeared in combination. Indeed, ancient Greek literature normally formed part of a larger aesthetic whole, the spoken text being accompanied by, or accompanying, singing or dancing or both. During its early, formative period, Greek literature was a highly social art, manifesting itself in public performances of epics, in hymns to the gods, in songs at parties, in drama performances before festive audiences, and no doubt also in many informal contexts. Even after the advent of writing, Greek society remained largely oral for a long time – far into the fifth century BCE – and Greek literature of these times can be regarded as an essentially oral literature.

The fifth and fourth centuries BCE were very dramatic for Greece politically. Supported by Athens, several Greek city-states in Asia Minor rebelled against the great power of the region of the time, the Persian Empire, and on two occasions, Persia launched major military campaigns on mainland Greece in revenge, aiming to subjugate the inimical city-states. Surprisingly, confederations of Greek states withstood both attacks. On the first Persian incursion, Athens and Plataea won a decisive victory at Marathon close to Athens in 490 BCE. A decade later, a Greek alliance was able to beat back a huge Persian invasion after a successful naval battle at Salamis in 480 BCE and a victory over the Persian army at Plataea in central Greece the next year. A period of peace ensued, but internal Greek tensions were building up. The steady growth of the power of Athens and its confederates

threatened the interests of Sparta, a traditionally highly important *polis* in the Peloponnesus, and its allies. The last six decades of the fifth century BCE were dominated by more and more brutal armed conflicts between these parties. These wars ended in Athenian defeat but had had an adverse effect on the resources of all the Greek city-states involved.

In the relative power vacuum after the Peloponnesian War, the kings of Macedonia, a formerly unimportant state in northern Greece, began to wield more and more influence. In 336 BCE, the young prince Alexander – later known as Alexander the Great – acceded to the Macedonian throne and soon embarked on an enterprise of daunting audacity: he led a confederation of Greek armies into Asia Minor, attacking the Persian Empire itself. Alexander was stupendously successful. He swept down the Mediterranean coast and conquered Egypt, then struck at the heartlands of the Persian Empire, finally defeating the Persian high king in a decisive battle north of Babylon in 331 BCE. Alexander and his armies continued east and reached the Indus Valley. Along his way, Alexander disseminated Greek civilization and founded new towns and cities. Alexander died highly unexpectedly in Babylon in 323 BCE after a short illness and was buried in Alexandria in Egypt, one of the cities he founded and named. After his death, his empire almost immediately disintegrated into several independent parts, but Greek language and Greek culture remained important in Egypt and the western regions of Asia for many centuries to come.

Unlike Alexander's short-lived empire, the Roman Empire took shape slowly and lasted for centuries. Rome began as a settlement on a strategically placed hill at a crossing over the Tiber River. (According to Roman legend, the city was founded in 753 BCE by the abandoned twins Romulus and Remus – sons of Mars, the god of war – who had been nursed by a she-wolf.) Battle by battle and treaty by treaty, the growing city-state Rome came to dominate its closest neighbors and then, by the early third century BCE, the entire Italian peninsula, the Greek colonies included. The third century saw Rome conquer Carthage, a powerful Phoenician city in northern Africa at the site of present-day Tunis, after fierce, recurrent wars for the overall control of the territories around the western Mediterranean. Then Rome was free to develop its interests in the east and take control of Greece, the western parts of Asia, and Egypt. Rome also pushed north in Europe, incorporating what is now England and continental Western Europe, south of Germany. The Roman Empire reached its largest extension around 117 CE. At that time, Rome comprised the south of Europe – today's England and Wales, and everything south of a border stretching from present-day Belgium to Romania and including what is now southern Germany, Austria, and Croatia. But Rome also contained all the coastal areas around the Mediterranean – the coastal strip of northern Africa, the Levant, and

present-day Türkiye. This is in fact the geographical space in which we will practically always find ourselves in this chapter about European literature before 400 CE.

Evidently, this space does not really represent Europe but rather the regions around the Mediterranean. Most of Europe is found outside the borders of the Roman Empire, while parts of Africa and Asia fall within them. The areas that are now Ireland and Scotland were never occupied by the Romans, nor was Rome ever able to expand on the other side of the Rhine, where Germanic tribes put up successful resistance. Further to the east in Europe, we find other Indo-European peoples like Thracians and Scythes.

The large extension of the Roman Empire should not lead one to believe that Latin was spoken in the whole area around the Mediterranean in 117 CE and that Roman culture reigned supreme. There was an important east/west divide in the Mediterranean world: Roman culture dominated in the west, and Greek culture in the east. Also, native languages and cultures were still very much in existence in many places, even if Roman or Greek elements penetrated into everyday life to varying extents. This was certainly true in the African and Asian regions of the Roman Empire but also in much of Roman Europe.

Despite the fact that Rome had been extremely expansionist and had completely domesticated the Greek-speaking world militarily and politically, Greek culture exerted a strong and lasting impact on the Romans. Some Greek influences, most importantly the Greek-inspired alphabet already referred to, reached Rome quite early through Rome's more culturally advanced neighbors, the Etruscans, and somewhat later Rome came into direct contact with Greek culture through its relationships with the Greek colonies in Italy. In fact, one of the founding fathers of Latin literature was a Greek – Livius Andronicus (Lucius Livius Andronicus, c. 284–204 BCE), from the Greek Italian colony Tarentum. Livius Andronicus was probably taken as a prisoner of war when a boy and brought to Rome as a slave. He later became a teacher, and he translated Homer's *Odyssey* into Latin and put dramas in Latin, adapted from Greek originals, on the stage, beginning in 240 BCE. This is just an early example of Greek cultural influence. Knowledge of Greek and the Greek classics became central elements of Roman higher education and remained so throughout our period. As we shall see, this left a deep imprint on Latin literature proper. It is worth pointing out that the Roman appreciation of things Greek was not reciprocated: there was never any widespread interest in the Greek-speaking world in learning Latin or studying Latin authors.

Rome began as a monarchy, but the last king was ousted as early as 509 BCE. Rome became a republic, and it remained so for almost 500 years. The supreme executive power was exercised by two consuls, elected for

only a year. There were two legislative assemblies, but the most important political body was the Senate, which formally just offered advice. Senators typically came from a circle of elite families, a group which could admit newcomers but still constituted a rather clearly demarcated class, a kind of Roman high nobility. With time and with Rome's territorial growth, this system of government came to face great difficulties. This was partly due to the problems of exerting efficient central control over a vast geographical area at a time when communications were still slow and precarious, but the gravest threat to the system did not come from logistics or even from class conflicts within the aristocratic republic – in the end, conflicts within the elite brought down the republic. Repeatedly, powerful men raised armies, or used their legally received command of armies, in order to gain control of the state. Alliances and intrigue undermined constitutional order. Finally, in 49 BCE, Caesar (Gaius Julius Caesar, 100–44 BCE) brought about a lasting change in the political system. Leading his veteran army, with which he had fought a long and successful war against the Celts in present-day France, he refused to bow to the Senate and his political opponents, who had tried to curb his ambitions, and rebelled. Over the next three years, he forcefully put down all opposition around the Roman world and returned to Rome, where his supreme rule soon caused a reaction among the elite. Caesar was murdered in 44 BCE, but after a series of civil wars his adoptive son Octavian (Gajus Octavius, 63 BCE–14 CE), later known as Augustus (meaning something like "The Illustrious One" or "The Venerable"), managed to take over his position and consolidate imperial power in his hands. With that, Rome had changed from a republic into a state ruled by an emperor. The space for public political discussion, and for free speech in general, diminished considerably, not without palpable effects on literary life.

When speaking of European literature before 400 CE, we will consider all literature in Greek and Latin "European." (As we shall see later, several important authors writing in Greek or Latin came from outside Europe.) We will first turn to literature in Greek, then to literature in Latin. Where Greek literature is concerned, particular attention will be paid to works from c. 750 to 400 BCE, the time when the main Greek epic, lyric, and dramatic genres came into being.

## Ancient Greece

### Classical Epic and Lyric Poetry

The oldest Greek literature preserved to our days consists of four epics. The *Ilias* (*Iliad*) and the *Odysseia* (*Odyssey*) are associated with the name of Homer (Homeros), while the *Theogonia* (*Theogony*) and the *Erga kai hemerai* (*Works and Days*) are ascribed to Hesiod (Hesiodos). We have

no certain dates for either author, but Homer is most often supposed to have been active during the eighth century BCE and Hesiod during the latter half of the same century. Originally, there were many epics besides these four, some of them constituting the so-called epic cycle, but only fragments are preserved of the others.

Long heroic narratives in verse are known from many cultures: Mesopotamia, India, Central Asia, various parts of Africa, and so forth. It is highly probable that there are influences from the Near Eastern epic tradition behind the Greek epic and also an Indo-European background of epic poetry. Nevertheless, the ancient Greek epics represent a variant of the genre with its own marked individuality.

The two groups of remaining Greek epics are palpably different. The Homeric texts are quite comprehensive: the *Iliad* consisting of c. 16 000 lines and the *Odyssey* of around 12 000, while those of Hesiod only comprise around 1000 lines each. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are narratives of heroic adventures, while Hesiod's epics contain teachings about the genealogy of the gods and the wise way of tending your farm and household. Nevertheless, both Homer and Hesiod were considered epic poets by the ancient Greeks. All four works were held in high esteem, but Homer's poems, particularly the *Iliad*, were awarded pride of place. The four epics draw on the rich store of history, legend, mythology, and lore that existed in their culture – particularly on stories about the Greek gods and about the deeds of Greek heroes in the distant past. It is reasonable to assume that bards had long presented epic narratives in song and that the existing poems develop a substantial tradition. Still, they must be supposed to represent, in their present shape, a reforming of traditional material by supremely gifted individuals.

Homer's two epics build on the tradition about a war in the past between a Greek alliance and the city of Troy (or Ilion), which was a city located high up on the western coast of Asia Minor, close to the Dardanelles. The conflict had been caused by the actions of Paris, a son of the king of Troy. Paris had become involved in a dispute between the goddesses Hera (wife of Zeus), Aphrodite (goddess of love), and Athena (goddess of wisdom) about who of the three was the most beautiful. The three goddesses asked Paris to be the judge of this, and they all tried to bribe him. Finally, he awarded the prize to Aphrodite, a judgment which made Hera and Athena want to destroy not only Paris but also his native city. Aphrodite had promised Paris the love of the most beautiful woman on earth, and this was Helen, already married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta. Visiting Sparta as a guest-friend of the king, Paris won the love of Helen and persuaded her to elope with him to Troy. Menelaus, wanting to bring Helen back and eager for revenge, organized a campaign against Troy; it was finally led by Menelaus' even more powerful brother, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae. Among the many notable kings and

princes in the Greek alliance were Achilles, the foremost warrior in the Greek camp, and Odysseus, the cunning king of the island of Ithaca.

The Greek fleet arrived at Troy and began a siege of the city that was to last for 10 years. Finally, the Greeks seemed to give up: they sailed away, leaving behind a very big horse made of wood. The Trojans triumphantly moved the horse into the city and started a celebration. During the night, however, a hundred Greek warriors hidden inside the horse emerged and opened the gates to the city for the clandestinely returning Greek army. Troy was conquered, pillaged, and burned down. The Greek triumph was complete, but many unforeseen adversities awaited some of the victors on their way home or on their homecoming. Agamemnon was killed by his wife, who had taken a lover, as soon as he was back in Mycenae, and the gods long refused Odysseus, the mastermind behind the Trojan horse, a return to his home: his voyage from Troy to Ithaca cost him another 10 years.

Homer makes no attempt to present this large material in its entirety. For both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he selects a quite limited period of time as the subject of his story. The events recounted in the *Iliad* take place during 51 days toward the end of the war and those in the *Odyssey* during the last 40 days of Odysseus' homeward journey. In the *Iliad*, familiarity with the Trojan War as a whole and its background is largely taken for granted, which makes it possible for Homer to describe the events that he chooses to cover with much scenic detail. In the *Odyssey*, the story of Odysseus' adventures is in large part told in retrospect, in an inserted, realistically motivated first-person narrative by Odysseus himself. These are surprisingly sophisticated technical choices.

The *Iliad* begins with an address to a goddess: "Goddess, sing of the wrath of the son of Peleus, Achilles." References to a goddess who authorizes the content, and to singing, are features that would come to be characteristic of the opening of a European epic. The goddess addressed here should be Calliope, the muse of epic song. (The muses, daughters of Zeus, were guardians and supporters of the arts.) According to the implicit idea, it is the goddess who will be singing, through the human bard, the superhuman song to which the audience will be listening.

After a few words about the indicated theme – the wrath of Achilles and its dire consequences – the events are set in motion. The action starts with a confrontation between Achilles and Agamemnon. Their enmity has a complex history behind it. Among booty taken from the Trojans, Agamemnon has set aside for himself a young woman who is the daughter of a priest of Apollo. Her father has offered a generous ransom, which has been rejected by Agamemnon. The priest then asks Apollo for support, and the god sends pestilence to the Greek camp. As soon as the reasons for the disease become clear to the Greeks, Agamemnon is forced to appease the god by returning the young woman to her father

but decides to compensate himself by appropriating, instead, Achilles' favorite female slave. Insulted and vengeful, Achilles ceases to take part in the fighting, and in his absence, the Trojans gain the upper hand. Not until his best friend, Patroclus, has fallen, can Achilles be persuaded to join the Greek forces again. When back in the fighting, he is soon able to kill the main Trojan hero, Hector, another son of the king of Troy, in combat. Hector is the man who slew Patroclus, and Achilles desecrates Hector's body. Then the *Iliad* ends, on a note of reconciliation, with the handing back of Hector's corpse to his father and with Hector's burial.

At the opening of the *Odyssey*, we find Odysseus on an island – unclear where – which belongs to a minor goddess, the nymph Calypso. Calypso is preventing Odysseus from leaving her island. She keeps him as her lover and wants him to stay, even offering him immortality if he decides to do so, but Odysseus does not stop longing for his wife and his home island. He has now been away from Ithaca for 20 years and many suppose him to be dead, but not his faithful wife, Penelope, and their son, Telemachus. They are still waiting for Odysseus to come back, but they are in a more and more awkward position, for Odysseus' house is full of suitors who are urging Penelope to finally choose a new husband among them. At this point the gods decide to let Odysseus return. Athena visits Ithaca in disguise and helps Telemachus embark on a voyage to mainland Greece to try to find his father; a large portion of the beginning of the epic is devoted to the account of Telemachus' journey. In the meantime, the god Hermes, the special messenger of the gods, has been sent to Calypso to order her to let Odysseus leave. Odysseus is offered a raft and sets out for home but is shipwrecked by his principal enemy among the gods, Poseidon (god of the sea), who happened to be absent during the meeting of the gods in which Odysseus' release from Calypso was decided upon. Luckily, our hero is able to swim ashore on the island of the Phaeacians (another place only found in legendary geography), where the king, Alcinous, takes pity on the stranded anonymous stranger. At a feast in Alcinous' palace, the bard Demodocus entertains the guests with songs, also songs of the Trojan War – which supplies us with an interesting description of how epic song was performed. (The bard, sitting among the guests on a chair inlaid with silver, accompanies himself on a lyre. A little later, when the party has moved outside for competitions, Demodocus sings again in the open air, now surrounded by dancing young men.) Odysseus cannot withhold his tears when thinking of the war, and the heroes who were his comrades-in-arms, and his present situation. This gives his identity away, and Odysseus now recounts his vicissitudes after the fall of Troy to the Phaeacians (and thereby also to the audience of the *Odyssey*). The Phaeacians take him back to Ithaca on a magic ship; in Ithaca, a loyal swineherd keeps him hidden; soon also, Telemachus is back in the island. With some help from Telemachus and

old loyal servants, Odysseus is able to kill the suitors, reunite with his wife, and restore his power over his kingdom.

Homer's two epics are full of thrilling incidents, even suspense, but they are not simply stories of adventure. Larger human themes are introduced, not so much directly – for there is very little moralizing in the even flow of Homer's rich account, where the acts, thoughts, and feelings of both Greeks and Trojans are registered in a way that makes a balanced, unbiased impression – but through the content itself, the arrangement of events, and the tone. The heroic is prominent in the *Iliad*, and such values as strength and courage and sheer vital force are certainly endorsed. At the same time, however, it seems fair to say that the fragility of human life is made conspicuous and tacitly accepted. Homer's listeners will have known as well as the poet himself that Achilles, the extraordinary hero, was foretold to die at Troy, paying, as it were, with the brevity of his life for the brilliance of his fame. They also knew that the proud city of Troy would be utterly destroyed and that the annihilation of a whole society was indeed a realistic risk: the Greeks were fully prepared to raze an enemy city to the ground, killing the men and taking the women and children away as slaves.

The Greek gods were naturally thought to be able to intervene in human affairs, but they were also perceived as, ultimately, inscrutable. The Greeks built temples to their gods, sacrificed to them, celebrated and entertained them with hymns and competitions, and tried to hold them in respect, but the gods seem to have appeared very much as forces beyond control and understanding, following no definable codes of behavior. In the Homeric epics, the gods occupy much space, and except for their might and their immortality, they are very human. They love, hate, commit adultery, slander each other, and constantly scheme. As is obvious from our summaries of the epics, the gods also function as helpers or adversaries in the human drama, always ready to support their own human favorites, but for the most part, the interference of the gods remains invisible to the human agents.

The Greeks envisaged a life after death, but Hades, the kingdom of the dead, was seen as an inhospitable place where the deceased, being much like shadows, led an afterlife without pleasures and substance. In a famous episode in the *Odyssey*, we get a glimpse of the conditions of the dead. Odysseus wishes to learn about his possibility of returning to Ithaca from the renowned seer Tiresias who is now in Hades, so Odysseus and his men visit the kingdom of the Cimmerians, where it is possible to get into contact with the underworld. Odysseus digs a hole in the ground at a certain spot and sacrifices sheep, whose blood runs down into the hole, whereupon a mass of souls gathers around him noisily. (Related motifs are known from the Mesopotamian stories about Gilgamesh, so there may be an oblique Near Eastern inspiration behind the scene.) Among

the souls is Achilles, who paints a bleak picture of his present existence. Odysseus attempts to console Achilles by reminding him of his fame and glory (the following translations from Homer are by Richmond Lattimore unless otherwise indicated):

> *no man before has been more blessed than*
> *you, nor ever*
> *will be. Before, when you were alive, we Argives*
> *honored you*
> *as we did the gods, and now in this place you have*
> *great authority*
> *over the dead. Do not grieve, even in death,*
> *Achilleus.*

But Achilles is not satisfied with his lot:

> *O shining Odysseus, never try to console me*
> *for dying.*
> *I would rather follow the plough as thrall*
> *to another*
> *man, one with no land allotted him and not much*
> *to live on,*
> *than be a king over all the perished dead.*

As long as life lasts, though, it can be rich and rewarding. There is much to make life worth living for the Homeric heroes – self-assertion and honor, combats, feasts, friendship, love and lovemaking, song, beautiful things – and Homer also conveys a vivid sense of the attractions of life. Speaking of material things, for example, the *Iliad* contains a loving description of a new, grandiose shield that Hephaestus (the god of smithery) has made for Achilles after Achilles' original armor, borrowed by Patroclus, has fallen into Trojan hands with Patroclus' death in battle. Various scenes are depicted on the shield: earth, heaven, sea, sun, moon, and stars; cities in peace and at war; fields, meadows, and vineyards – in short, all the splendor of the earth. Speaking instead of emotions and human relationships, there is a touchingly described reunion between Odysseus and Penelope near the end of the *Odyssey*. Penelope is not entirely certain of the identity of the rather worn man who has just killed her suitors and now tells her that he is her long-awaited husband, not even after he has been bathed and oiled and dressed in fine clothes and made beautiful through Athena's magic. But Odysseus can describe for Penelope in detail how he himself fabricated what is still their big marital bed, building from an olive tree that continues to anchor the bed to the earth. Now Penelope's doubts are dispersed, and they can lie down in that very special bed and rest in each other's arms.

Homer uses one of his favorite figurative devices, the extensive comparison ("as ... so"), the so-called Homeric simile, to give us the scene:

> *He wept as he held his lovely wife, whose thoughts*
> *were virtuous.*
> *And as when the land appears welcome to men*
> *who are swimming,*
> *after Poseidon has smashed their strong-built ship*
> *on the open*
> *water, pounding it with the weight of wind*
> *and the heavy*
> *seas, and only a few escape the grey*
> *water landward*
> *by swimming, with a thick scurf of salt coated*
> *upon them,*
> *and gladly they set foot on the shore,*
> *escaping the evil;*
> *so welcome was her husband to her as she*
> *looked upon him,*
> *and she could not let him go from the embrace of*
> *her white arms.*

As we can see, Homer does not really enter into the inner worlds of Odysseus and Penelope, analyzing their feelings. Penelope's emotions are described indirectly, by being compared to the feelings of shipwrecked people reaching land. Psychological states and events are certainly present in the Homeric epics, but we are not really invited to adopt the inner stance of the agents and follow the minute movements of their hearts and minds. These manifest themselves, to the extent that they do, through authorial description or in action: Homer shows us the tears in the characters' eyes and tells us about the anger in their voices. Much of the characters' thoughts and feelings is also made public in speech: the narrator's third-person relation of the events is interwoven with first-person utterance by the characters (as in the dialogue between Odysseus and Achilles quoted earlier), which actually makes up a sizable portion of the two epics.

Homer was an outstanding master of Greek epic art, but many features of his two poems are standard characteristics of the genre. A key element of the epics is the meter itself. Greek verse as a whole was quantitative: its ultimate building blocks were long and short syllables, which could then be used to form various metrical patterns. Epics were composed in hexameters. A hexameter line consists of six units or "feet," the first five units of a line being made up of dactyls (a long syllable followed by two short ones: "– u u") or spondees (two long syllables: "– –"), and the

sixth and last unit being either a trochee (a long syllable followed by a short one: "– u") or a spondee. This can be exemplified with the opening line of the sixth song of the *Odyssey*, in which we find the exhausted Odysseus lying on the Phaeacean shore after his shipwreck (long syllables boldfaced):

***Ōs*** *o men* ***enth****a kath****eud****e pol****ytlas di****os Od****ysseus***
– *u u* | – *u u* | – *u u* | – – | – *u u* | – –

Translating into English (our own translation, this time, not Lattimore's), and using a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables instead of the alteration of long and short syllables in the Greek original (the vowels of syllables carrying stress are accentuated below):

*Thús he now slépt there, the nóble and*
*múch-éndúring Odýsseus,*
– *u u* | – *u u* | – *u u* | – – | – *u u* | – *u*

The relatively long hexameter lines ("hexameter" means, literally, "six-measure") offer ample space to the poet: one such line can suffice for the representation of a rather complex image or event. A poem in hexameters consists of an arbitrary number of lines and is not divided into stanzas. However, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were later subdivided into books or songs (24 for each epic), which made such division into a kind of chapters common in epics.

Ancient Greek epics were composed orally, not in writing. The poet or singer – for epics were originally sung, as in the Demodocus episode – composed on the spot at every performance, creating an epic anew, as it were, from the story material available to him and the requirements of the moment: the time at disposal, the composition of the audience, and so on. The bard certainly had a repertoire of epics that he remembered, but the epics were not available to him as fixed, memorized texts. It is known from the study of oral poets in modern times that trained singers can keep astoundingly large amounts of subject matter in their heads and produce it as epic poems in performances, poems whose exact wordings will change somewhat – or perhaps change considerably – from one occasion to another. Homer will have been able to hold the entire *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and many other epics besides ready for recital.

Instant composition was aided by special techniques whose use leaves characteristic marks in the poems. Poets had at their disposal sets of formulas to help them build their verses. The best-known kind of such prefabricated phrases is the so-called standing epithet, which consists in a formulaic characterization of a character or a phenomenon. One or the other of these standard descriptions could always be employed

when a given hero emerged in the epic, the choice between the formulations being decided, not least, by the demands of the meter, that is, by the nature of the metric space waiting to be filled out in the hexameter line. For example, Odysseus can be called "noble," *dios* (– u), as he has been recorded to be called 60 times in the two epics, or "resourceful," *polymētis* (u u – u; 81 times), or "much-enduring, noble," *polytlas dios* (u – – – u; 38 times), or "sprung from Zeus," *diogenēs* (– u u –; 4 times), and so on. The "polytlas dios Odysseus" in the line quoted above is thus entirely formulaic. But there were formulas at hand for the description of many kinds of situations, and one can even point to substantial blocks of lines that recur verbatim in the Homeric epics.

At an early stage, epics may well have been performed in situations like the one described in the Demodocus episode in the *Odyssey*. Later, however, in classical Greek antiquity, epic poetry was recited or chanted rather than performed to music. It was no longer presented by a court poet, which is what Demodocus appears to have been, but by traveling professional or semi-professional performers. These performers were called rhapsodes, a name associated with the verb *rhaptein*, "to stitch," and *ode*, "song" – rhapsodes were stitching together songs (compare the word "rhapsody"). Epic poetry could be presented in many contexts. For example, the Homeric epics were regularly performed in Athens from the later sixth century BCE onward in connection with rhapsody competitions during the important festival called the Panathenaia. At that stage, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* probably also existed in written versions, but we do not really know when the epics were first written down.

The genesis of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has been the subject of scholarly debate for centuries. According to majority opinion today, some individual did indeed create the two poems in something like their present shape, but we have no reasonably credible information about him, and the name "Homer" may be a later construction. One might have supposed that the dialect used in the poems could at least tell us in what geographical area Homer was active, but the ancient Greek epics used their own special variety of Greek, somewhat archaic and influenced by various Greek dialects. However, Homer is often supposed to have come from one of the Greek city-states on the west coast of Asia Minor, possibly Chios. If that is correct, he was the first prominent Asian in Greek literature.

From a biographical point of view, Hesiod is a somewhat different case. The poet makes references to himself both in the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*, and if we are to believe the tradition and suppose that the two works are by the same author, we can put together a meager biography. According to his poems, Hesiod lived in Boeotia in mainland Greece, at the foot of Mount Pieria, the home of the muses, his father

having migrated there from Asia Minor. Implicitly, Hesiod portrays himself as having led a farmer's life. As a young boy, herding his sheep on the slopes of the mountain, he met the muses, who mocked him but also presented him with a staff. As an adult, he won a poetic/rhapsodic contest in the island of Euboea. His brother Perses cheated him of part of his heritage, but Perses was a good-for-nothing, and sensible Hesiod managed to lead a much better life. That is what the poems say. But we have no means of checking their information – maybe much of it, not only the entertaining story of Hesiod's encounter with the muses, was produced for poetic reasons.

The *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* can be characterized as didactic poetry, that is, as poetry meant to convey teachings to its audience. Their didacticism tends to move the speaker into the foreground and give the poems a more personal tone. Some of the attitudes expressed by the poetic speaker – for instance, his contempt for women and his liking for order and security – can seem to reflect the outlook or temperament of a specific individual.

The *Theogony*, "The Genesis of the Gods," surveys the history of the gods and the divine powers. After a long introduction celebrating the muses, Hesiod begins with the formation of Chaos (meaning "the Gap") and then Gaea ("the Earth"). More and more divinities emerge from these two, spontaneously or because of sexual unions. One of the children whom Gaea begets with her son Ouranos ("Heaven") is Kronos, the god who breaks Ouranos' power, cutting off his testicles. Kronos, in his turn, is finally dethroned by Zeus, who could perhaps be called the hero of Hesiod's poem: Hesiod places Zeus at the center of the present world order and surrounds him with an extensive pantheon of major and minor gods. The *Theogony* then proceeds to a review of goddesses who conceived children with mortal men, after which Hesiod asks the muses to sing of famous women, but at that point the poem ends abruptly.

The dramatic and often violent *Theogony*, narrated in a compact but flexible and inventive manner, offers a rich account of Greek deities and their genealogies. Researchers have perceived influences from Egypt or the Near East in the poem, both in the didacticism as such – wisdom literature was an important genre in both those cultural spheres – and, more specifically, in the understanding of the origins of the universe, reminiscent of the version in the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*.

The *Works and Days* is a more diverse work, conveying practical wisdom and offering instruction in everyday matters – very general recommendations, like the admonition to exercise foresight and avoid violence, but also very concrete advice, like the directions about the best time for lumbering or the most expedient measurements for a wooden cart. Through its concern with practical things, the poem offers fascinating

images of rural life in ancient Greece. The divine is, however, also present in the *Works and Days*. The poem begins with an invocation of the muses and of Zeus (and with a personal address to Perses), and there are mythological excursions. For instance, the poet relates the story of how Zeus, enraged by the tricks of Prometheus who deceitfully made it possible for the mortals and not only the gods to use fire, lets Hephaestus create the beautiful Pandora and send her as a gift to Prometheus' brother. On her arrival on earth, Pandora opens her vase ("Pandora's box"), which proves to be full of thousands of evils: sicknesses, labors, pains, sorrows – all of them things previously unheard of among men. Another mythological element is the story of the five ages: Hesiod describes how a splendid age of gold was replaced by ages of silver and copper, and then the age of heroes, and now by our own deplorable age of iron.

Homer's and Hesiod's epics have much to say about both gods and men, and they are full of images of concrete situations that invite thought and feeling and supply tools for comprehending the world. The social and performative character of the epics should also be kept in mind. The performer and his audience will have vividly reimagined the epic situations together, and that may well have helped them feel the social bond between them, and also their bond with their forefathers and the gods.

Many genres of song were cultivated by the Greeks. Particularly in early times, singing was often combined with music and dance, as in a scene in the *Iliad* where a group of young men and women are returning from a vineyard with their baskets full of grapes, making music, singing, and dancing:

> *Young girls and young men, in all their*
> *light-hearted innocence,*
> *carried the kind, sweet fruit away in their*
> *woven baskets,*
> *and in their midst a youth with a singing lyre*
> *played charmingly*
> *upon it for them, and sang the beautiful*
> *song for Linos*
> *in a light voice, and they followed him, and with*
> *singing and whistling*
> *and light dance-steps of their feet kept time to*
> *the music.*

The social character of ancient Greek lyric poetry is also well-captured in the quotation – the performance together with an audience whose presence and participation were essential. Much lyric poetry was sung in chorus: hymns to the gods – ritual paeans to Apollo or dithyrambs in honor of Dionysus (god of grape harvest, wine, and ecstasy) – funeral

dirges, processional songs, choral odes celebrating victors in athletic contests, and more. Lyric poetry could also be performed by an individual singer at a private feast or at a gathering of a special society and have a mundane or political theme.

"Lyric" poetry was originally associated with the lyre (*lyra*) or other string instruments, like the cithara. The ancient Greeks did not in fact consider other types of poetry lyric – not, for instance, iambic meters or elegiac couplets, both accompanied by the flute – but no such division is respected here. Generally speaking, differences between poetic forms carried much significance. A poetic meter was associated with a more or less specific "ethos," a certain range of themes and sentiments. Thus, for example, hexameter preserved a special closeness to the heroic and mythic, the elegiac couplet to the lament. Iambic meters (built around "iambic" feet or units: "u –") were considered to be the ones best suited for the rendition of ordinary speech and were therefore particularly related to the everyday and the polemical.

For a few centuries, approximately 650–450 BCE, lyric production was rich and often of remarkably high quality. Song certainly existed before that – and Homer's lines about the young girls and young men can serve as a reminder of that – but the first preserved properly lyric texts in Greek stem from Archilochus (Archilochos), active in the middle of the seventh century. From the mid-fifth century, drama succeeded lyric poetry as the most innovative kind of verbal art, as lyric poetry had succeeded the epic.

Most of the ancient Greek lyric texts have disappeared, and much of what still remains are fragments. (We saw that that also applies to Greek epic works, and it holds true for the drama as well.) For instance, we only have one, or possibly two, fully preserved poems by Sappho (c. 610–c. 570 BCE), a poet from Lesbos, an island just off the west coast of Asia Minor. Sappho was one of the few female authors of great renown during European antiquity. The most prominent theme in her poetry is love, with its awe, longing, lovesickness, and erotic maneuvering. In Sappho, love is most often female homoerotic love, hence the modern ambiguity of the word "Lesbian." The following Sapphic poem survived, albeit incomplete, because it was quoted in a Greek treatise on the literary sublime from the Roman era (translation by Willis Barnstone, reproduced with permission of Indiana University Press).

*To me he seems equal to gods,*
*that man who sits facing you*
*and hears you near as you speak*
*softly and laugh*

*in a sweet echo that jolts*
*the heart in my ribs. Now*

*when I look at you a moment*
*my voice is empty*

*and can say nothing as my tongue*
*cracks and slender fire races*
*under my skin. My eyes are dead*
*to light, my ears*

*pound, sweat pours from me.*
*I convulse greener than grass*
*and feel my mind slip as I go*
*close to death,*

*yet I must suffer all, even poor …*

The poem makes love's anguish vivid and present, exquisitely and at the same time trenchantly. It is a surprisingly timeless poem, stripped of mythological apparatus and intellectual fineries. Even though mythology is by no means absent in Sappho's poems – particularly not the goddess Aphrodite – intimacy, directness, and precision are characteristic qualities of Sappho's style.

Free verse is being used in the English translation, but Sappho's Greek original is in one of her favorite meters, called, after her, the minor Sapphic. With some simplification, the rather complex metrical structure of its strophes can be described like this:

– *u* – *u* | – *u u* – | *u* – *u*
– *u* – *u* | – *u u* – | *u* – *u*
– *u* – *u* | – *u u* – | *u* – *u*
– *u u* – | *u*

The end of the strophe appears calculated to create the impression of a sigh or a dying away. It is worth remembering, though, that we cannot reconstruct the music and the personal performance, which will both have meant very much also for the rhythmic impression of Sappho's text.

We know little about Sappho's background. She is not mentioned in contemporary sources – apart from a brief reference by another famous poet from the Lesbos of her time, Alcaeus (Alkaios, c. 620–c. 580 BCE) – and later biographical notices from antiquity are of disputed credibility and sometimes contradictory. Sappho is supposed to have belonged to an aristocratic family, and a circle of young girls often seems to figure in her poetry as addressees and audience. It has been suggested that she may have served as an educator or a priestess, but the hypothesis is not supported by any substantial evidence. The homoerotic content

of Sappho's poems was always a delicate point in the reception of her work but did not prevent it from being profoundly admired by leading arbiters of taste in antiquity.

Male solo poetry, represented by Archilochus, Alcaeus, and others, often has a social setting easier to define, that of the symposium. A symposium was a prestigious male party for drinking, debate, and entertainment – the Greek word *symposion* comes from the verb *sympinein* meaning "to drink together." Monodic lyric song was one frequent feature of symposia. Its themes could be, for instance, politics, as is often the case in Alcaeus, or love and lovemaking, as in many poems by the somewhat later Anacreon (Anakreon, perhaps 570s–490s BCE).

While Sappho is an early exponent of the flourishing of Greek monodic lyric poetry, Pindar, from Boeotia, was the last and greatest master of the choral ode. With Pindar (Pindaros), we are approaching times for which we have more certain biographical dates; it is most commonly supposed that he was born in 518 BCE and died in the late 440s or early 430s.

The Greek choral ode was celebratory in character. The choral ode was an eminently social genre: odes are supposed to have been performed by a chorus dancing and singing to music (lyres and wind instruments) in front of an audience, preserving the old unity of song, music, and dance. Most odes are built up of triads: first a strophe (*strophe*; literally: "turn"), then an antistrophe, and then an epode ("after-song"). Possibly, the choir moved in one direction during the strophe, in another during the antistrophe, and stood still during the epode. A typical ode consists of an arbitrary number of such tripartite building blocks.

The bulk of Pindar's still extant poems – he wrote in several genres, but much of his oeuvre is lost – consists of odes written in celebration of victors in major Panhellenic games: the Olympian, the Pythian, the Nemean, and the Isthmian. Such games were held at regular intervals in honor of various gods – Zeus, Apollo, Poseidon – and comprised competitions in such branches as chariot racing, boxing, sprints, and pentathlon. Participation required economic resources: you had to have the leisure time for being there and, if you intended to compete, for training in advance. You also needed the economic means to travel and, where the particularly prestigious chariot race was concerned, to procure charioteers and chariots (for in chariot racing you did not compete in person), so originally, and still in Pindar's times, the competitions tended to be between men of means (women did not participate). These games, which attracted participants from all over the Greek world, were genuinely significant events and victors reaped much fame, fame that might be further advanced by celebrations by poets and choruses. Pindar composed victory odes – words, music, and movements, but no music or choreography remains – and trained choruses to sing and dance them, receiving compensation for his efforts. This also meant that he traveled

much and was in contact with powerful men. We know little about how his odes were actually performed – perhaps sometimes at the games themselves and sometimes in the victor's home city, sometimes with and sometimes without Pindar being present in person.

Greek lyric poetry characteristically moves against a background of myth, divine or heroic, but myth is nowhere as much in evidence as in chorodic poetry with its address to society as a whole. One of Pindar's efficient means of glorifying the victor and his city-state is to relate them to Greek myth and, with that, to the supreme Greek values. The prestigious character of the discourse is also emphasized by its complex and allusive language – a feature apparently characteristic of praise poetry irrespective of culture. In his odes, Pindar used to mix details about the victor and his achievements with references to a myth and general reflections closely or distantly related to athletic success. His odes were typically inspirational, highly dynamic rather than logical, rich in figurative language, and sometimes obscure.

The ode by Pindar known as the Eighth Pythian is a very late work of his, usually dated to the year 446 when the poet would already have been over 70. The poem is composed in celebration of Aristomenes from the city-state of Aigina, victor in pentathlon at the Pythian games in Delphi. The ode comprises 100 lines and is structured as five triads (strophe, antistrophe, and epode). Pindar begins with a long invocation of Peace, extolling her ability to punish those who challenge her recklessly, and then moves on to a praise of Aigina and its proud history as the nurse of ancient heroes among whom Aristomenes now takes his well-deserved place. Pindar then surprisingly associates Aristomenes with a legendary hero from Argos, Alcmaion. Borrowing the voice of the ancient seer Amphiaraos, Pindar describes the heroic figure that Alcmaion makes at the gates of Thebes, where Alcmaion is engaged in an ultimately successful revenge attack on the city, and Pindar suggests that Amphiaraos' praise of the great Alcmaion is equally applicable to Aristomenes. From there, the poet returns to Aristomenes' present success and glory and ends with a reflection on human greatness and its transitoriness – again, a somewhat unexpected element – and a prayer directed to the personified Aigina (translation by Richmond Lattimore):

> *In brief space mortals'*
> *delight is exalted, and thus again it drops to*
> *the ground,*
> *shaken by a backward doom.*
>
> *We are things of a day. What are we? What are we*
> *not? The shadow of a dream*
> *is man, no more. But when the brightness comes,*
> *and God gives it,*

*there is a shining of light on men, and their*
*life is sweet.*
*Aigina, dear mother, bring this city to haven*
*in free guise, by Zeus' aid and strong Aiakos',*
*Peleus and goodly Telamon aiding, and*
*with Achilles.*

In 446, Aigina is in fact unfree, having been overcome by Athens. Invoking righteous, well-armed Peace, and Mother Aigina, and her succession of legendary heroes (Aiakos, Peleus, Telamon, and Achilles), and the idea of civil war and wars of revenge, Pindar may seem to encourage the idea that Aristomenes (and the illustrious family behind him, also referred to in the ode) has the capacity to help Aigina regain its freedom. But Pindar's possible political intimations are shrouded in prophetic language difficult to penetrate and perhaps also eclipsed by the thought of the brevity and changeability of human life with its heaven-born gleam and dreamlike evanescence. Pindar's ode cannot have been easy to grasp on a first hearing, but it might well have made a deep and powerful impression on its audience. The poem is certainly much more than a simple eulogy.

## Classical Greek Drama

Literary forms that combined music, movement, and words were also the starting point of Greek drama, perhaps the most original of all Greek literary creations. We will particularly attend to tragedy but also touch upon the other two main dramatic genres in ancient Greece: comedy and satyr play.

As we have seen, choral displays were a common feature of Greek festivals and games, but the exact genetic links between such performances and drama remain disputed. In his *Peri poietikes* (*Poetics*, c. 330 BCE), the philosopher Aristotle (Aristoteles, 384–322 BCE) maintains that the choral form from which tragedy originated was, more specifically, the dithyramb and that may very well have been the case. Anyway, tragedy is supposed to have developed from improvised interventions by the leader of a chorus, the next step being the addition of a separate actor who could enter into dialogue with the chorus and its leader. The introduction of an actor is ascribed to a dramatist called Thespis and supposed to have taken place before the end of the sixth century BCE.

Dithyrambs were sung and danced in many city-states, but they were particularly popular in Athens, a city where the production of wine was important and the cult of Dionysus flourished. The main Dionysian festival in Athens was the annual Great, or City, Dionysia. From the late sixth century onwards, tragedy competitions formed part of the City

Dionysia: the celebration of the god ended with a statue of Dionysus being carried to the theater and placed in the scenic space, where the god oversaw, and was entertained with, dramatic performances. Each year, three writers were entrusted with the composition of a set of three tragedies and one satyr play each. All 12 plays were then performed during the City Dionysia. Wealthy Athenians assumed the responsibility of financing the productions – resources were needed for the time-consuming training of choruses and actors, the preparation of dresses, and so forth. Several plays will have been performed in the same day, and going to the theater must have been an extraordinary experience for the audience, particularly since no other form of contemporary art exhibited a comparable degree of textual, visual, and auditory complexity. No more impressive organized spectacle could be found.

The theater itself, as a physical feature of the environment, developed together with drama. The Greek word *theatron* means, approximately, "seeing-place." To begin with, drama was characteristically performed in an open space – the *orchestra*, that is, the "dancing place" – at the foot of a hill where spectators could gather on the hillside and get a good overview. For example, the *orchestra* of the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens, the most important of the many fora of dramatic art in the Greek world, was located at the foot of a slope up to the Athenian Acropolis. With time, the "tent," *skene* (compare "scene"), erected next to the *orchestra* and meant to serve practical needs in connection with the production, developed into a permanent and more impressive structure which could be integrated into the dramatic fiction as, for example, a royal palace where actors could go in and out. Stone seats for the spectators were also built on the mountain slope, which considerably increased the distinctness and compactness of the theater. These improvements and others were introduced successively during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

The theatrical productions were not commercial ventures. Like the City Dionysia as a whole, Athenian drama was a municipal concern and functioned, among other things, as a celebration of the city-state and its beliefs and values. At the same time, the City Dionysia and the dramas helped showcase the greatness of Athens before the rest of the Greek-speaking world. In fact, Athenian statesmen of several generations appear to have worked consciously on making the city culturally central in Greece. To some extent, Homer had been appropriated by Athens by means of the rhapsody competitions during the Panathenaic Games, and the highly impressive drama performances came to constitute another remarkable cultural asset.

Tragedy was no doubt entertaining, just like the Homeric epics, but like Homer tragedy also offered superb representations of great conflicts and unforgettable deeds, representations inviting the audience to think and feel about their world, their values, and the enigmas at the

heart of their existence. The leading authors of tragedy were excellent narrators and possessed considerable lyrical skills – after all, they could draw inspiration both from Homer and the Greek lyric tradition. The subject matter of their tragedies was normally taken from myth, or, much more rarely, from recent history, but it could be treated rather freely: myths might be elaborated or transformed and history fictionalized in the interests of the drama. The stories told were no doubt largely familiar to the audience but were often worked into new, intriguing patterns. It is worth emphasizing, however, that our knowledge of classical Greek tragedy is far from complete. All the tragedies that remain from the fifth century – the golden age of Greek drama – are 31 plays by only 3 dramatists: 7 by Aeschylus (Aischylos, c. 523–456), 7 by Sophocles (Sophokles, c. 496–406), and 17 by Euripides (c. 480–406).

There are massive formal similarities between these extant plays. Typically, they begin with an introductory scene, then the chorus enters, and then episodes – dialogues between characters that move the action forward – are interspersed with odes from the chorus (or, sometimes, choruses), and at the end, all the performers leave the *orchestra*, the chorus often singing a final ode while departing. The choral odes, and also the recitatives (spoken, or half-sung), were accompanied by music, which was normally played on an *aulos*, a wind instrument sounding much like an oboe or a clarinet. Normally, the scene remained unchanged throughout the drama, and the action was supposed to take place within a very restricted time frame. Things imagined to occur in the world of the play outside the space visible to the spectators – distant events, happenings too brutal to display, etc.– were narrated by messengers from afar, or persons coming out of the palace, or similar characters. Both chorus and actors were wearing masks, and all actors were male. It is uncertain whether women were even allowed to participate as spectators.

Without departing from this well-defined basic structure, Greek tragedy changed perceptibly during the course of the fifth century. Most importantly, perhaps, the three major dramatists differed in the role allotted to the chorus, in the number of actors used, and in the nature of the core dramatic conflict. In the oldest tragedy that we still possess, Aeschylus' *Persai* (*The Persians*) from 472, it is easy to perceive that tragedy is an offshoot of choral performances. The chorus, who in this drama is meant to represent a group of Persian elders, enters at the very beginning and opens the play with an extensive ode describing the situation in the world of the play and expressing the prevailing feelings in Persia. Xerxes, the Persian high king, has left with a huge and glorious army to conquer Greece, and news about the campaign is eagerly, and anxiously, awaited. While the drama unfolds, more and more tidings of a devastating Persian defeat arrive – and finally Xerxes himself

distraught and disheveled. The mood grows progressively darker, and the tragedy ends on a note of profound desolation (translation by Alan H. Sommerstein):

> *CHORUS*
> *Ió, ió, Persian ground is hard to tread on!*
> ...
> *XERXES*
> *Ehhh-ehhh, ehhh-ehhh – the triple-oared –*
> *CHORUS*
> *Ehhh-ehhh, ehhh-ehhh – boats destroyed them!*
> *XERXES*
> *Escort me now to my palace.*
> *CHORUS*
> *Yes, I will escort you, with loud wails of grief.*

And chorus and protagonist depart from the *orchestra*, leaving only emptiness behind.

Aeschylus had introduced a second actor, which made it possible for him to organize verbal exchanges between two characters at a time – in *The Persians*, the dramatis personae include, in order of appearance, a messenger from the front, Xerxes' mother, the ghost of Darius (her deceased husband, the previous high king), and the unfortunate Xerxes. The chorus is constantly present, however, and performs odes of considerable length. Even more importantly, the dramatization of a collective feeling of defeat and lack of hope makes up the real substance of the play, and the chorus, itself a collective and clearly meant to be representative of a whole society, conveys that feeling particularly effectively.

We saw that Athens had a leading role in the Persian Wars. In fact, Aeschylus himself was one of the Athenians who fought against Xerxes' fleet at Salamis eight years before the production of *The Persians* (and he also took part in the battle against Darius' army at Marathon 10 years before Salamis). The description of the Persian defeat was therefore, indirectly, also a description of the Athenian victory, something which must have counterbalanced the drama's somber mood at a performance in Athens. On the other hand, no malicious joy can be detected in the representation of the grieving Persians. As in Homer, one can sense an underlying awareness that a society can never be certain of its destiny, that the threat of destruction is real and ever-present. But for the grace of the gods, Aeschylus' Athenian audience could have found itself in the position of the Persian chorus.

The most famous work by Aeschylus is his last tragedies, the three closely related plays *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi* (*Libation Bearers*), and *Eumenides*, which together form the trilogy the *Oresteia* (458 BCE). This

time, the subject matter is drawn from myth – among our still existing fifth-century tragedies *The Persians* is the only one on a historical theme. In *Agamemnon*, king Agamemnon returns to Argos (not Mycenae as in Homer) as a victor after the Trojan War. While he has been away for 10 years, his wife Clytemnestra has taken a lover, Aegisthus, a cousin of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra receives Agamemnon with feigned enthusiasm but immediately kills him in his bath. However, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have a son, Orestes, and in *Libation Bearers*, he returns to Argos together with a friend and meets his sister Electra. Electra has remained in the royal palace, where she finds the situation unbearable. She and her female slaves arrange an opportunity for Orestes to kill first Aegisthus and then his mother. After the murders, Orestes is attacked by the Erinyes, female avenging deities intent on punishing him for the killing of his mother, and he flees the city. At the beginning of the *Eumenides*, Orestes, still pursued by the Erinyes, has come to Athens and is seeking refuge at a statue of Apollo – it was Apollo who originally insisted that Orestes must avenge his father by killing Agamemnon's murderers. Athena, who is also the patron goddess of Athens, promises to be the judge in the conflict between the Erinyes and Orestes, and she sets up a council of judges, a court which, she says, shall always be there to judge in cases concerning blood. The Erinyes and Apollo present the case for the prosecution and the defense, respectively. The judges cast an equal number of votes for and against Orestes, but Athena, as the court's president, has the casting vote, and she decides in Orestes' favor. The Erinyes, who constitute the chorus in the *Eumenides*, complain intensely and protractedly but are finally pacified by being given a permanent abode in Athens and a separate cult. Indeed, the Erinyes, the female Furies, become the Eumenides, literally, the Gracious Ones. Once again, Aeschylus has placed the theme of violence center stage. In the *Oresteia*, the forces of primitive revenge, male and female, are brought under civilized Athenian jurisdiction. The freely treated mythic material furnishes Aeschylus with profound ethical conflicts and gripping human drama.

Sophocles, almost 30 years younger than Aeschylus, was a master of dramatic form. His *Oidipous tyrannos* (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, c. 430–426 BCE; also called *Oedipus Rex*, or *Oedipus the King*) was particularly praised by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, and the view of tragedy that Aristotle puts forward in his treatise can perhaps be said to be especially modeled on, or suited for, Sophocles' tragic art. According to Aristotle, tragedy is the representation ("imitation," *mimesis*) of a complete, comprehensive, and elevated string of actions, a representation which will arouse pity and fear in its audience and also lead to a "purification" (*katharsis*) of these emotions. That characterization seems to fit the tragedies of Sophocles better than those by Aeschylus, with their marked tendency

to ethical-political reflection, or those by Euripides, with their stronger focus on individual psychology and interpersonal relationships.

*Oedipus Tyrannus* recounts the story of Oedipus, ostensibly the son of the king and queen of Corinth, one of the most important city-states. At the beginning of the drama, we find Oedipus as the king of Thebes. He once arrived in Thebes as a stranger but liberated the city from a sphinx that was terrorizing it: Oedipus managed to solve a riddle posed by the half-human monster and thus broke its spell. He was rewarded with the kingship of Thebes and with marriage to its widowed queen, Jocasta, with whom he now has several children. The former king, Laius, once Jocasta's husband, had been killed on a journey to the oracle in Delphi.

When the drama opens, Thebes faces new adversities: the city is being devastated by a plague. Jocasta's brother Creon returns from Delphi and the oracle, where he has been sent by Oedipus to find out about the cause of the disease, and he can announce that the unresolved killing of Laius has contaminated the city; the perpetrators, who are to be found in Thebes, must be punished. Oedipus promises to avenge Laius and sends for the seer Tiresias, hoping to learn more about the identity of the killers. Tiresias is reluctant to speak, but finally, pressed by Oedipus, confirms that the killer (not killers) is indeed living in the city. Tiresias also discloses that the killer is a native Theban but thought to be a naturalized stranger; it will soon become obvious that this man has killed his own father and is now living with his mother, being her son and husband in one, both a brother and father to his own children. Oedipus feels that Tiresias is pointing his finger at him and is shaken.

To comfort Oedipus, Jocasta tells him that he can safely disregard seers and oracles. It was once predicted, she says, that Laius would be killed by a son that she bore him but that prediction proved false: Laius and Jocasta abandoned that son to die on the lonely Mount Kithairon, his feet tied up, when he was three days old, and in the end, Laius was killed by highwaymen in a place where three roads crossed. Far from reassuring Oedipus, this new information fills him with fear: he has killed a man of Laius' description in response to a provocation and that occurred at a place which, as he soon realizes, must be the exact spot where Laius died. Oedipus also remembers all too well that the Delphian oracle once foretold him that he is destined to kill his father and beget children with his mother – actually, Oedipus left Corinth only to prevent this awful prophecy from coming true.

At this point, a messenger from Corinth arrives: the king of Corinth is dead, and Oedipus is designated to be the new king. Oedipus is grieved by the news of the death but also encouraged: he did not kill his father after all, old age did! Nevertheless, Oedipus is not willing to return to Corinth for fear of eventually coming to enter into an incestuous relationship with his mother. But the messenger can allay his fears: he can tell Oedipus that he is in fact a foster-child, found on a mountain with his legs tied up, then

adopted by the childless royal couple of Corinth. A few final twists and all becomes obvious both to Jocasta, who hangs herself, and to Oedipus, who puts out his own eyes and leaves Thebes together with his young daughters.

Sophocles works with as many as three actors – Aristotle credits him with having raised the number of actors from two to three and also with the introduction of scene painting – and he makes good use of the possibilities that this offers: exchanges between actors fill more of the drama than in Aeschylean tragedy. This diminishes the space left to the chorus somewhat, but the chorus is still very significant in commenting on the events and their deeper meaning. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, we encounter a chorus of Theban elders. They identify with their city, torn between hope and despair. They believe in the gods and in just eternal laws, and also in human striving – which should not, however, be driven by overweening self-confidence and pride (*hybris*). Here is David R. Slavitt's translation:

> *FIRST CHORISTER*
> *I pray for a fate that allows me*
> *praise for my words and deeds*
> *as models of strict observance*
> *of heaven's laws*
> *handed down from Olympus.*
> *They are not merely mortal*
> *and never expire or lapse*
> *but, like the gods who gave them,*
> *continue in power forever.*
>
> *SECOND CHORISTER*
> *Hubris will beget*
> *a tyrant as its child,*
> *where insolence and greed*
> *mount to the pediment*
> *or rush to the lip of the chasm*
> *where feet can find no purchase.*
> *But decent competition*
> *brings profit to the city,*
> *and the gods approve and protect it.*

Oedipus did not commit patricide and incest of his own free will, but that is never mentioned in his favor, nor is the fact that he was abandoned as a newborn baby and then kept ignorant of his birth, haunted by gossip about it but never certain of the truth. The moral laws governing the universe appear to be as blind to human conditions and purposes as natural laws: in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is the act as such, not the intent, that counts.

*Oedipus Tyrannus* is very skillfully constructed; the ironies of the situation and the possibilities of suspense are masterfully exploited. Aristotle appreciated very much the element of sudden realization of what had been hidden, the breakthrough of knowledge ("recognition," *anagnorisis*), particularly since it was coupled with a reversal of luck ("peripety," *peripeteia*), a combination which he deemed certain to produce pity or fear. Oedipus also fits Aristotle's general expectations concerning the suitable tragic hero, being "someone not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error; and one belonging to the class of those who enjoy great renown and prosperity" (translation by Stephen Halliwell). Indeed, Aristotle specifically mentions Oedipus as an example of such a character. Considered in a perspective less concerned with the purification of emotions than that of Aristotle, *Oedipus Tyrannus* can seem ambiguous in a productive way. The world of the play is plagued by scourges and by immorality, but, on the other hand, remedies can perhaps be found, albeit painful ones. There is an eternal order which also defines right and wrong, but, on the other hand, that natural and moral order belongs to a sphere high above us mortals and is impervious to human reason and human wishes.

Besides *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the somewhat older *Antigone* (c. 442–441 BCE), also set in Thebes, is Sophocles' best-known drama. Antigone, a daughter of Oedipus, buries her brother Polynices, who has taken part in an attack on the city, although Creon, her uncle, who now rules the city, has strictly forbidden the Thebans to show his opponent this consideration. Antigone respects kinship and tradition and pays for that with her life, sentenced to death by Creon. But Creon's hubristic imposition of his own dictatorial will leads to the death of his own son and wife and leaves him chastised and humiliated at the end of the drama, as Oedipus was in *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

Euripides, 16 years younger than Sophocles, does not deny the existence of the gods or their ability to intervene in human affairs, at least not explicitly, but he develops further the emphasis on the role of the individual character – already more perceptible in Sophocles than in Aeschylus – and he takes it in a more psychological direction. Strong and conflicting personal emotions are at the heart of Euripides' plays.

*Medeia* (*Medea*, 431 BCE) is perhaps the most famous tragedy by Euripides. Medea, the main character, was a princess in her native Colchis. She fell in love with the Greek prince Jason when he came to her distant and half-barbaric country to recover a golden fleece, which properly belonged to his family. Jason had to go through a series of magical trials in order to come into possession of the fleece, and Medea taught him how to pass those tests, but only in exchange for a vow of marriage. When the drama begins, Jason and Medea are living in exile in Corinth

and they have two young sons – but Jason has deserted Medea and married the daughter of the Corinthian king. Consumed by jealousy, Medea decides to hurt Jason as profoundly as she can, and with her magical skills, she has effective means at her disposal.

The king of Athens, Aegeus, happens to be in Corinth. Medea describes Jason's breach of faith to Aegeus and manages to extract from him a solemn oath that he will receive her as his guest in Athens and always protect her. Now that Medea has an escape route, she is ready to act. Feigning submission and friendship she sends to Jason's new wife a particularly fine gown and a diadem of gold to go with it. A messenger can soon inform Medea, and the audience, of the result: when the princess put on the lavish gifts, enthralled by their beauty, the diadem made her catch fire and the gown started to eat its way through her flesh. The gown and the diadem proved impossible to remove, and she died in terrible agony. Her father, the king, tried to help her, but could not liberate himself from her dissolving body and also died.

Medea shows no sign of compassion on hearing this, and she is still decided to perform an act much more painful to herself: she will kill her and Jason's two children. She has just explained her reasons and expressed her pain in a monologue, and now she enters her house – the whole drama is played out in an open space in front of her house – to fulfill her intention. We can hear the children's terrified exclamations from inside, and when Jason arrives to confront Medea over the murder of his new wife, he is met by news that affects him even more deeply: his sons are dead, killed with a sword by their mother. Jason cannot even revenge himself on Medea or bury his sons: Medea flies away with the corpses of their children in a chariot drawn by dragons. Jason appeals to Zeus, but can do no more.

The audiences of his own time were often critical of Euripides, and he won only four tragedy competitions. Apparently, Euripides' contemporaries tended to find his subject matter too sensational and his treatment of it too undignified and too loosely structured. In Hellenistic times, however, Euripides seems to have enjoyed more popularity than Aeschylus and Sophocles and, as we saw, he has had many more plays preserved to modern times.

It is certainly easy to feel, at the end of *Medea*, that justice has not prevailed: is Medea really meant to get away with murder? But one should remember that Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* also commits cold-blooded murder and that she too remains unpunished at the end of the drama. True, Aeschylus lets the chorus predict grave consequences of Clytemnestra's deeds both for herself and her lover – but the chorus in *Medea*, a chorus of women from Corinth, also points out to Medea that the killing of kin will call forth both human revenge and punishment from heaven. What was new and disturbing in Euripides was perhaps,

rather, the relatively weak emphasis on the gods and on eternal laws and the strong focus on altogether human passions. Medea's jealousy, her desire for revenge, and her finally overridden love for her children are the center of attention in *Medea*. It is worth noting, however, that the moral expressed by the chorus is altogether traditional and balanced, as in this strophe and antistrophe (translation by Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer):

> *See, how strong love overwhelms us.*
> *See, how it wounds and destroys*
> *and yet when Aphrodite wants to soothe,*
> *nothing cures as love cures.*
> *So, my love, shoot me gently,*
> *barely break my skin with your terrible arrows.*
>
> *Then I'll know happiness in life.*
> *Then Aphrodite's urgings will enflame*
> *my heart, but love will keep me faithful, far*
> *from the wildness of a stranger's bed.*
> *Then I'll know that when she chooses lovers,*
> *it means that love will never fail.*

But Aphrodite does not typically want to soothe in the dramas by Euripides. In *Hippolytos* (*Hippolytus*, 428 BCE), another of his most important plays, she is even, personally, the instigator of much evil. Hippolytus, the son of Theseus who is king of Athens, is a young man of very high moral standards. He is a follower of Artemis, the goddess of hunting, and he scorns love. This greatly displeases Aphrodite, and she has a terrible punishment in store for him. The goddess has begun by igniting love for Hippolytus in the breast of Phaedra, his stepmother, Theseus' second wife, and now she lets an unstoppable catastrophe unroll.

At the opening of the drama, Phaedra is pining away, suffering from a complaint that she is not willing to explain. When her nurse manages to find out the cause of the ailment, the nurse discloses it to Hippolytus after having first secured a promise of silence from him. But Hippolytus does not love Phaedra; on the contrary, he finds her love for him shameful and unnatural. Having learned this, Phaedra hangs herself, but she leaves behind a letter accusing Hippolytus of having attempted to rape her. The honorable Hippolytus is prevented by his promise of silence from making the real truth known, and his simple protestations of innocence are not believed by Theseus. Theseus drives Hippolytus out of the city and asks Poseidon to kill him, a request which the god grants immediately and in a dramatic fashion. At this point, Artemis appears to Theseus and explains the whole chain of events to the devastated king.

Phaedra's illicit love for her stepson is highlighted in the drama, as Medea's feelings were in *Medea*. And in *Hippolytus*, we seem even further removed from eternally valid ethical laws. The gods certainly play a large part, but their own morality can be questioned. Aphrodite and Artemis can hardly be meant to represent supreme ethical principles expected to be taken seriously: as in Homer, they are driven by their own passions or personal agendas. As Aphrodite herself (here called "Cypris," "Lady of Cyprus") explains in the very first lines of the drama (translation by David Kovacs):

> *Mighty and of high renown among mortals and in heaven alike, I am called the goddess Cypris. Of all who dwell between the Euxine Sea and the Pillars of Atlas and look on the light of the sun, I honor those who reverence my power, but I lay low all those whose thoughts toward me are proud. For in the gods as well one finds this trait: they enjoy receiving honor from mortals.*

Rather than as an affirmation of unchangeable laws of right and wrong, *Hippolytus* comes across as a drama about the terrifying force of love.

Less than 70 years separate the oldest extant drama, Aeschylus' *The Persians*, from the latest remaining fifth-century tragedy, Euripides' posthumously produced *Iphigeneia en Aulidi* (*Iphigenia at Aulis*, c. 406 BCE). We have seen that the basic form of the tragedies remains the same, as do the sources from which their subject matter is drawn, but that structural and technical developments occurred, and that the three major tragedians differed subtly in outlook and approach. It is now time to say a few words about the other major genres of fifth-century Greek drama – the satyr play and the comedy.

In Greek mythology, satyrs were a kind of forest demons, half human being and half horse or goat. The satyrs, who belonged to the retinue of Dionysus, were hypersexual and in constant pursuit of the forest nymphs. Satyr plays featured a chorus dressed as satyrs and were comical or burlesque. Only one such play has been preserved in its entirety, *Kyklops* by Euripides (*The Cyclops*, date unknown). Satyr plays normally took their themes from mythology, and *The Cyclops* retells a story from the *Odyssey*, the tale of how Odysseus and (some of) his men escaped from their encounter with a one-eyed giant, the Cyclops (meaning "Round-Eye").

The genesis of the satyr play is even less certain than that of tragedy, and the same can be said about comedy, *komoidia*. The name "comedy" itself is associated with the word *komos*, among whose meanings are "festive procession" and "song with music and dance." (Tragedy, *tragoidia*,

means "goat song": supposedly, a goat was associated with the dances from which tragedy arose, whether as a victim to be sacrificed or as a prize for the chorus.) Aristotle points to phallic songs as the origin of comedy, but there were many kinds of phallic songs and of more or less burlesque processions, rites, or ceremonies involving song, music, and dance in Greek societies.

As a fully developed dramatic form, comedy is younger than tragedy. From 486 BCE, comedy competitions formed part of the City Dionysia: every year, five comic writers presented one play each. Of the large stock of fifth-century comedies, only eleven works by Aristophanes (c. 450–c. 388 BCE) have survived. Typically, they address contemporary phenomena in a humorous or ironical vein, introducing a startling or absurd idea and developing its implications.

In *Nephelai* (*Clouds*, 423 BCE), for example, the Athenian Strepsiades is in the process of being ruined because of the extravagance of his son Pheidippides with his costly weakness for the aristocratic sports of riding and horse-racing. Strepsiades hits upon the idea of hiring sophists, teachers of higher learning, to educate his son, for if Pheidippides can learn from Socrates and his school how to turn black into white, he will be able to prove his father's debts null and void. Pheidippides refuses to comply, so Strepsiades himself has to become a disciple of Socrates. Only after Strepsiades has proved entirely unable to assimilate the bizarre teaching of Socrates, does Pheidippides agree to enlist in the Socratic school. At the end of the play, Pheidippides is already accomplished enough to beat up his father while offering binding proof that he has every right to do so and has the right to beat up his mother as well. But Strepsiades has now had more than enough of modern philosophy, and at the end of the comedy, we find him on the roof of Socrates' house, where he is breaking it up and torching it. The name *Clouds* refers to the chorus, which is a chorus of clouds. According to Socrates, the clouds are goddesses and are being propelled by Vortex, while Zeus is just a myth. But Socrates' nebulous convictions are certainly wrong, for the clouds themselves later explain to Strepsiades that the traditional gods exist and that he should learn to fear them.

Another well-known comedy by Aristophanes is *Lysistrate* (*Lysistrata*, 411 BCE), set against the dark background of the final decade of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), the long final phase of the conflict between the Spartan and Athenian alliances. Greek women from different warring states come together in Athens and decide to refuse their men sex until peace is declared. The underlying theme – the desperate need for peace – is serious enough, but Aristophanes' take on it makes room for much enlivening satire and a good deal of obscenity.

## Classical Greek Prose

Epic, lyric poetry, and drama are all, in a wider sense, *poetic* genres, genres employing verse. The distinction between verse and prose was important to the ancient Greeks, and their concept of poetry, *poiesis*, was arguably their closest counterpart to our modern concept of literature. Verse, and originally also music, marked poetry as a thing apart.

There will have been oral storytelling in the Greek world, and the huge material of myth that represents such an important element in classical Greek culture must originally have been transmitted orally. Also, at a later stage, fable became an important genre. A fable is a very short fictional narrative with a specific message. This message may be explicitly spelt out or possible to derive from the story itself. The best-known variety of the genre is the animal fable, relating a scene or scenes between two animals behaving and speaking like humans. (The word "fable" comes from Latin "fabula," meaning, among other things, "small talk" or "fictional narrative"; the Greek designation was "logos" or, later, "mythos.") The fable stems from the east, and its emergence in Greece is another example of early literary influences from the Near East. Fables are associated with the wisdom literature so important in ancient times in Mesopotamia and Egypt. There were fables in Sumer around 2000 BCE.

In ancient Greece, authors sometimes used fables to make a point in a way engaging the imagination. The oldest known example of a fable in Greek is found in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (translation by Glenn W. Most):

> *And now I will tell a fable to kings who themselves too have understanding. This is how the hawk addressed the colorful-necked nightingale, carrying her high up among the clouds, grasping her with its claws, while she wept piteously, pierced by the curved claws; he said to her forcefully, "silly bird, why are you crying out? One far superior to you is holding you. You are going wherever I shall carry you, even if you are a singer; I shall make you my dinner if I wish, or I shall let you go. Stupid he who would wish to contend against those stronger than he is: for he is deprived of the victory, and suffers pains in addition to his humiliations." So spoke the swift-flying hawk, the long-winged bird.*

Not that Hesiod subscribes to the philosophy of the hawk. Instead, he turns the story into a lesson for Perses: "As for you, Perses, give heed to Justice and do not foster Outrageousness ... Justice wins out over Outrageousness when she arrives at the end; but the fool only knows this after he has suffered."

Many early Greek authors made use of fables or referred to fables – Archilochus, Aristophanes, Plato, Aristotle, and others – but in classical Greece, fable is after all a low, popular genre. Fables could be told in verse – as Hesiod does – but the fable is, on the whole, a prose genre and, to begin with, an oral genre. There was obviously a large stock of fables, and they came to be associated with the name of Aesopus (Aisopos). Aesopus may or may not have existed, but fables were commonly viewed as Aesopian creations.

The historian Herodotus considers Aesopus to have been a slave on the Greek island of Samos, close to the western coast of Asia Minor, in the sixth century BCE, and to have got himself killed in Delphi. According to the legendary material about Aesopus known from later sources, he was set free because of his very special skills and made a career giving political advice to powerful rulers. However, in Delphi, he criticized the greed with which the Delphians extracted offerings in payment for oracles, and he was framed and killed by the Delphians in revenge. Several researchers have in fact wanted to find social criticism in the fable tradition, but probably without real justification. Fable was no doubt a low and popular genre, but like proverbs and other folk wisdom, it could be put to many kinds of use. The fable of the hawk and the nightingale appears, in itself, just cynical (or realistic: might makes right), but Hesiod brings it up as an example of how not to think and act.

As we have seen, writing was known in the Greek world since, perhaps, the early first millennium, but it took time before it became widespread and used for ambitious nonofficial discourses in prose. There were no comprehensive prose texts at all before the late seventh century, when laws, treatises, and the like began to be recorded in writing. From the sixth century onwards, cosmological and mythical/historical works in prose can be found. The foundations for a breakthrough of the written word were laid in the late sixth century and firmly established during the course of the fifth, when learning to read and write became a key part of Greek education, which was earlier more exclusively concentrated on military and musical achievements. During the later fifth century, schools teaching "grammar" – the art of operating with *grammata*, signs of writing – could be expected to be found in every city-state; in Athens at least, all free males seem to have received basic schooling. The arena for sports, the gymnasium (*gymnasion*), continued to occupy an important didactic role, but it could now also become an intellectual center and often included a library and an auditorium.

Epic, lyric poetry, and drama were all highly social arts (recited by bards in front of an audience, sung in a circle of friends at a symposium, publicly performed as part of a religious state festival, and so forth). At the outset, the same holds true of the Greek prose genres, particularly of oratory. Public speaking before courts and political assemblies was

highly important in Greek city-states, not least in states with democratic constitutions like fifth-century Athens. Oratory was first developed into an art – a technique, *techne* – in Greek Sicily in the early fifth century, but was soon imported into Athens together with another new cultural phenomenon, the sophist, the professional teacher of advanced learning. Sophists were polymaths; a sophist might even claim to master all existing knowledge. Sophists gathered groups of students around them and taught them, for quite considerable fees, over a longer period of time, maybe three or four years, answering for their entire higher education. The sophist might then move on to a new city, finding a new group to teach.

Sophists were by no means radicals; however, advanced teaching and discussion inevitably introduced a spirit of inquiry. Sophists were unwilling to accept received opinion unquestioningly, and they had a keen sense of the role of the purely conventional in human behavior and human societies. "Man is the measure of all things," is a saying ascribed to the early sophist Protagoras (c. 490–c. 420 BCE). The slightly gnomic utterance seems to draw attention to the relativity of all knowledge by suggesting that if measurements are to be made (or moral or factual truths established), the measurement (or the establishing of the truth) will ultimately be the work of a human being.

During the final decades of the fifth century, the highly accomplished Sicilian teacher Gorgias – not known to have been called a sophist, but working in the manner just described – circulated in the Greek world, beginning in Athens in 427. Rhetoric, the art of public speaking, was an essential component of his educational program. Rhetoric rooted itself firmly in Athens, not least through one of Gorgias' pupils, Isocrates (Isokrates, 436–338 BCE). Isocrates, who first made a career as a writer of speeches – Athenians were obliged to speak for themselves without advocates at trials but could order specially written speeches from experts – opened a successful institution of higher education in Athens in 393, where rhetoric occupied a central position in the curriculum. The most famous of Athenian orators, Demosthenes (384–322 BCE), is said to have wanted to attend Isocrates' school but lacked the economic means. (Shyness and a weak voice prevented Isocrates himself from being an impressive public speaker.) Speeches were often circulated in written form, and speeches from the classical period have reached us through a chain of copies; several of Demosthenes' speeches still survive.

From the very beginning, there were tensions between sophism and rhetoric on the one hand, philosophy on the other. Philosophy – *philosophia*, literally, love of wisdom – can be said to have referred to the acquisition of knowledge or understanding of the world; naturally enough, it often had a strongly speculative character. Greek philosophy originated

in the sixth century in Miletus, a city on the west coast of Asia Minor, with speculations about the fundamental material of which the world is made: could it be water (*hydor*¸ *hygron*), as Thales believed, or the boundless (*apeiron*), Anaximander's proposal, or air (*pneuma*), Anaximenes' idea? It has been pointed out that these notions are borrowed from Babylonian or Persian mythology but put into a new context and regarded as refutable conjectures rather than mythical truths.

Speculation about the fundamental nature of matter then developed considerably, which led, around the end of the fifth century, to such sophisticated conceptions as Democritus' idea that our world is entirely made up of atoms (by which Democritus meant indivisible material particles) and of empty space. This physically orientated line of thought was, however, not the only one pursued. A number of fifth-century philosophers, impressed by the existence of ostensibly perennial abstract structures such as those studied by mathematics, were prepared to conceive of the realm of the immaterial and eternal, graspable only through rational thinking, as the most fundamental aspect of reality.

Plato (Platon, 428/427–348/347 BCE) was a very important exponent of the latter mode of thinking. Plato belonged to an aristocratic and politically conservative Athenian family; throughout his life, he remained free to pursue his intellectual and political interests. As a young man, he was close to Socrates (Sokrates, 470–399 BCE), who seems to have been an Athenian middle-class man with a passionate interest in how we are to live and in the concepts with the help of which we attempt to come to terms with such questions. In Plato's philosophical dialogues, where Socrates is almost invariably one of the protagonists, we encounter a Socrates who is constantly querying his interlocutors and himself and exposing the flimsiness of our ideas and our lack of deeper knowledge in a constant search for credible intellectual foundations. It is Plato's (and other disciples') description that has been decisive for Socrates' later reputation, not Aristophanes' characterization of the very same person as a ridiculous sophist in his *Clouds*. What is undisputed is that Socrates was actually sentenced to death for impiety in 399: his speech in his defense, his time in prison, and his last moments figure in various Platonic dialogues.

Some early Greek philosophers conveyed their thoughts in hexameters – for example, Parmenides and Empedocles in the fifth century – but philosophy and literature are naturally different things. When philosophy is drawn in for discussion here, it is because of the important intellectual role that it played and, in Plato's case, also because of the closeness of his dialogues to literature in a perfectly straightforward, modern sense. Several of Plato's texts could be mentioned in that connection, but *Symposion* (*Symposium*) is probably the best example. *Symposium* (which may have been written around 385–370 BCE – the exact dating of Plato's

dialogues remains uncertain) describes a symposium hosted by the tragedian Agathon, who has just won his first victory at a festival, something believed to have occurred in 416. On the night before, Agathon has celebrated intensively with his chorus and his supporters; now he has invited close friends to an informal party. Since most of those present suffer from serious hangovers at this stage, the company plans to go in for talking rather than drinking. They decide to give speeches in praise of love, and the contents of a number of speeches are reported, the last of them a long speech by Socrates. Socrates recounts the teachings about love that he once received from a woman from Mantinea called Diotima. Diotima appears to have described love to him much in the terms of a mystery religion. Initiation begins in youth, with fascination with physical beauty and love for a specific beautiful person. This can be expected to lead to the general appreciation of physical beauty and, later, beauty of the soul. From there, the novice proceeds to beauty in an even wider sense – for example, the beauty of sentiments and ideas – and, finally, to contemplation of the eternal beauty of which all beautiful things partake.

> *"This above all others, my dear Socrates," the woman from Mantinea continued, "is the region where a man's life should be spent, in the contemplation of absolute beauty. Once you have seen that, you will not value it in terms of gold or rich clothing or of the beauty of boys and young men, the sight of whom at present throws you and many people like you into such an ecstasy that, provided that you could always enjoy the sight and company of your darlings, you would be content to go without food and drink, if that were possible, and to pass your whole time with them in the contemplation of their beauty. What may we suppose to be the felicity of the man who sees absolute beauty in its essence, pure and unalloyed, who, instead of a beauty tainted by human flesh and colour and a mass of perishable rubbish, is able to apprehend divine beauty where it exists apart and alone? Do you think that it will be a poor life that a man leads who has his gaze fixed in that direction, who contemplates absolute beauty with the appropriate faculty and is in constant union with it? Do you not see that in that region alone where he sees beauty with the faculty capable of seeing it, will he be able to bring forth not merely reflected images of goodness but true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection but with the truth? And having brought forth and nurtured true goodness he will have the privilege of being beloved of God, and becoming, if ever a man can, immortal himself." (translation by W. Hamilton)*

After Socrates' speech, an unexpected interruption occurs. The young brilliant statesman Alcibiades comes gate-crashing, severely drunk, with a circle of friends, and is greeted with enthusiasm by Agathon and his guests. Alcibiades views Socrates and Agathon with some feigned or authentic jealousy: Alcibiades loves Socrates, and he fears that Socrates is attracted to Agathon. When the symposiasts demand a speech from Alcibiades, it becomes a speech in praise of Socrates. Alcibiades extols Socrates' virtues, hidden under a rough, satyr-like or Silenus-like appearance, and Socrates' discourse, which makes everyone who hears him, or hears someone else repeating his words, "amazed and possessed," but also Socrates' independence of outer influences – his physical courage in war, his indifference to Alcibiades' persistent attempts to seduce him (despite Alcibiades' renowned beauty and Socrates' fascination with beautiful younger men), and also his ability to drink copiously without being affected by the wine. The company, now in some disarray, turns to drinking; soon all have gone home or fallen asleep except Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates, who sit discussing Socrates' contention that a good comic writer will also be able to write good tragedies and vice versa. In the early morning, first Aristophanes and then also Agathon pass out, while Socrates, seemingly unaffected, rises to go about his usual business.

Agathon's symposium is no doubt a fiction. The persons we meet in the dialogue are historical enough, with the possible exception of Diotima, but the occasion itself and the speeches are generally supposed to have been freely invented by Plato. The six Athenians whose speeches on love are reported – we are told that less interesting contributions have been left out – appear chosen to represent various approaches to the theme: Phaedrus (a rather ordinary Athenian), Pausanias (an ardent defender of male love of boys), Eryximachus (a physician), Aristophanes (the comic writer), Agathon (the tragic poet), and, of course, Socrates. The passage quoted above certainly conveys the most central philosophical message in *Symposium*, but the doctrine put forward may appear more metaphorical than literal, and its presentation suggestive rather than discursive, for in what "direction" are you to fix your "gaze" in order to contemplate absolute beauty? The general meaning of the passage may be clear, but its figurative character bestows on it an openness to personal interpretation reminiscent of literature. This openness to interpretation is increased by a number of other features in the dialogue. For one thing, the six speeches on love are all different and all well received by the company, even if Socrates' contribution is singled out in various ways and no doubt calculated to lift the reflection on the theme up to the appropriate level and to cap them all. The dialogue therefore offers a number of various viewpoints for a reader or listener to consider, and being a dialogue, not a direct statement on Plato's part, it does not univocally endorse any single comprehensive evaluation of the different attitudes to love.

This relative openness constitutes, perhaps, the dialogue's deepest affinity to literature, but in the text, you can find a number of other devices that verge on the literary. The talks are interspersed with many concrete descriptions of events, particularly in connection with Socrates so that we are offered a lively picture of the symposium itself and also snapshots from Athenian roads and streets. Another noteworthy feature is that the dialogue largely consists of narratives nested inside other narratives. In effect, technically speaking, the whole dialogue is an exchange between a man named Apollodorus and a friend of his, taking place in an unspecified location many years after the symposium itself but obviously before Socrates' death. The friend, apostrophized by Apollodorus as a rich businessman, is curious about Agathon's famous symposium, and Apollodorus can tell him a good deal that he, in his turn, has heard from a friend, namely from Aristodemus, a well-known follower of Socrates who was himself present at the symposium. (It is true that Aristodemus fell asleep during the final discussion about drama in the small hours, but he woke up in time to accompany Socrates on his departure.) *Symposium* opens with a few utterances by Apollodorus and his friend, but then Apollodorus enters on a long second-hand account of the symposium, an account which occupies the rest of the text. We never return to the framing situation but simply lose sight of Apollodorus and his companion. *Symposium* is thus not presented as a direct rendering of dialogues and speeches at Agathon's party. In the passage in the block quote above, we are, instead, deep inside a system of Chinese boxes. In the reality of the fiction it is, ultimately, Apollodorus who is conveying to his anonymous friend what Aristodemus has told him (Apollodorus) that Socrates, at the symposium, maintained that Diotima had once explained to him (Socrates).

It is open to speculation why Plato chose this form: why he wrote dialogues, and why, in this particular case, he worked with such a complicated system of nested narratives. However, if we restrict ourselves to the *Symposium*, two very important themes are the exaltation of true beauty and true goodness and the homage to Socrates. Plato's doctrine of absolute beauty and its effects may in fact be better served by radiating toward the listener or reader from afar, broken through a number of prisms, than by being expounded directly, in the logical and reasoned form of a philosophical lecture. And the nested narratives create a situation where we are gradually being initiated into an inner circle with Socrates at its center – the non-philosophical but inquisitive rich businessman, Apollodorus' friend, is offered a view of that world and its values via Apollodorus, who in his turn is served in the same way by Aristodemus. At least in this dialogue, thus, Plato's literature-like devices can be seen as assisting the effective presentation of his themes. The indirectness of dialogical discourse could perhaps also help protect Plato against

accusations of the kind directed at Socrates. It cannot have been without risk to elevate Socrates, a man sentenced to death for impiety – in reality, for undermining the state – to an intellectual hero. The dialogical form makes Plato's statement more difficult to define – less philosophical, one could say, and more literary.

Plato deserves attention in a history of literature also because of the reflection on literature contained in some of his dialogues. Plato's literary erudition is beyond doubt – and the *Symposium* is full of literary allusions – but as a philosopher dedicated to absolute truth and firm foundations for thought he viewed the poets' art with much reserve and skepticism. Plato was prone to thinking of our ordinary world as a poor reflection of eternal and absolute realities – much as the carnal beauty of a young boy can represent nothing but "perishable rubbish" when compared with transcendent and eternal absolute beauty – and to regarding the representations found in literature and art as reflections of such mere reflections, one step further removed from the absolute and ideal. Poets, feeding the passions rather than perfecting the character and the intellect, were even denied a place in the ideal state Plato delineated in *Politeia* (*The Republic*), one of his major dialogues, unless they composed works patently useful for the society, works describing good persons and laudable deeds. Admittedly, poetry may seem to have something to do with truth but that is only a false impression according to Plato. In the dialogue *Ion*, a conversation between Socrates and the award-winning rhapsode Ion, a reciter specializing in Homer, we are shown that Ion may well talk of practically every aspect of the world in his Homeric recitations (since Homer talks of practically every aspect of the world) but that he does so without real insight into the matters. Ion can formulate speeches suitable for a military commander encouraging his troops, but it is divine inspiration, not knowledge, not mastery of the art of commanding armies, that makes this possible for him. For Plato, philosophy represents our only access to truth and knowledge, and he is always ready to unmask pretenders like rhetoric (as in the dialogue *Gorgias*) or poetry.

Aristotle, whose *Poetics* was broached in connection with the discussion of tragedy above, differed considerably from Plato in his views, also in his evaluation of poetry as an art, although he was originally a disciple of Plato. Aristotle's philosophical interests encompassed all aspects of reality, empirical and transcendental, and he wrote on all major branches of existing knowledge, including the arts of poetry and of rhetoric. Aristotle's thinking was founded on facts, actual or purported, which he theorized with remarkable skill, and his works, such as we have them, are rather literal expositions with little affinity to the literary. With respect to poetic art, Aristotle emphasized its symbolic dimension, which made it possible for him to characterize poetry as more philosophical than

history: he thought of drama and epic as offering general truths about how different kinds of people act rather than as describing, like history, the specific, incidental actions of certain individuals at a given time and place. Like Isocrates, Plato and Aristotle created their own important institutions of higher learning in Athens: the Academy (Akademeia, c. 387 BCE) and the Lyceum (Lykeion, 335 BCE).

As is obvious from Aristotle's comparison of history and philosophy, historical writing had become a recognized genre in the Greek world. The two great figures in the early history of the genre are Herodotus (Herodotos, 484?–c. 430/420 BCE), a man from Halicarnassus in southwestern Anatolia, and the Athenian Thucydides (Thoukydides, c. 460?–after 404? BCE). The main subject of Herodotus' historical work was the Persian Wars, particularly the events of 480 and 479, but the bulk of his history paints the background to the conflict between the Asian great power and the Greek world. Thucydides, for his part, is the historian of the Peloponnesian War. Both works are fairly comprehensive, equaling something like two modern book volumes each.

Herodotus had traveled widely in southern and Southeastern Europe, western Asia, and northern Africa and gathered very much knowledge (and lore) regarding the history, geography, ethnography, and so forth of those regions. In his history, he attempts to present this disparate material in an accessible fashion and make it relevant for the understanding of the conflict between Persia and the Greek city-states. Much of his history is occupied with Persia: as a background to the conflict, Herodotus tells us about the Persians and their habits, the Persian kings and their campaigns, the peoples with which their wars brought the Persians into contact – but also about the geography of the countries of those peoples, their habits, their rulers, and so on. Herodotus' narrative strategy unavoidably makes his history rather digressive; on the other hand, Herodotus is a great narrator capable of making stories concrete and alive. One of the memorable and well-told local stories contained in his extensive history (in this case, unfortunately, a demonstrably unhistorical one), recounts how Croesus, the exceedingly rich and successful king of Lydia in Asia Minor, receives the Athenian legislator and poet Solon, famous for his wisdom. Croesus asks Solon whom Solon considers the happiest of all men. Solon mentions a particularly virtuous Athenian and two brothers from Argos, all dead, but that was not what Croesus wanted to hear. Asked directly why he does not find Croesus the happiest of men, Solon explains that for him the truly happy person is one who can also end his life without misfortune, and the vicissitudes of our existence make everything uncertain; Solon is not prepared to call Croesus a truly happy man until he knows that Croesus has ended his life happily. This is a piece of wisdom that Croesus will remember vividly later on, when he is about to be burned alive after a failed war

against Persia. Not until the last parts of his history does Herodotus reach its real focus: Xerxes' campaign against his enemies among the Greek city-states and its immediate aftermath. Here, Herodotus is on firm historical ground, and we are offered a vivid, concrete, chronological version of the events.

Much of the information in Herodotus' history is of disputable correctness, and much is in fact presented as unverifiable or as hearsay by Herodotus himself, but the scope of Herodotus' interests, and, frequently at least, his generous openness when faced with cultures other than his own, are truly impressive. Moreover, Herodotus' view of things is often fascinating in itself, irrespective of its actual tenability. For example, Herodotus objects to the then common division of the world into Libya (that is, Africa), Asia, and Europe, since he holds that Europe is longer than Libya and Asia taken together, and incomparably broader than any of them. For Herodotus, the Indians are the easternmost people that we know of in Asia; all that is found east of India is a desert. Libya is surrounded by water, except on its border with Asia. The same is true of Asia itself, except for its eastern parts, while nothing of the kind is known of Europe. Seemingly, Herodotus is inclined to view Africa and Asia as two very big peninsulas and Europe, provisionally, as the mainland.

Thucydides, from a wealthy and well-connected Athenian family, served for a short time as a high military commander – a general, one could say – during the Peloponnesian War, but was suspended and exiled because of a failed mission and prevented from returning to Athens until after the end of the war. The character of his history, still unfinished at his death, differs profoundly from that of Herodotus. After a presentation of the background and causes of the war and of his own methods as a chronicler of it, Thucydides follows the events year by year or, in fact, half-year by half-year, but he never loses sight of the larger strategic situation. His remarkably analytical and dispassionate account is based on eyewitness reports or, sometimes, firsthand experience. Part of his analysis is conveyed in the form of speeches by leading actors in the drama, speeches explaining how they reason. As Thucydides himself underlines, he is naturally unable to render the speeches verbatim; however, he presents these speeches not as fictional constructs but as his best approximations of what was actually said (or should have been said) by the respective persons on the historical occasions in question. It is an interesting sign of the position of the oral in the Greek world around 400 that rhetorically formed speeches appear as a key instrument of thought and analysis, just as clarifying as carefully deliberated expository prose, or, in certain respects, superior to it.

Thucydides' declared reason for writing a history of the Peloponnesian War, beginning his work on this as soon as the war broke out, was that he believed this armed conflict to be bigger and more memorable than any

before. Interestingly, Thucydides describes the Trojan War as minor in comparison, relying on Homer's description of the forces engaged. Even the analytically minded Thucydides obviously thought of the Trojan War as of an actual historical occurrence – the events very much embellished by Homer, no doubt, in the usual fashion of the poets – and in his capacity as a military expert, he voices strong criticism of the inefficient strategies employed by the Greek side.

One can sense much intellectual and emotional urgency behind Thucydides' condensed formulations as he grapples with the understanding of the traumatic and profoundly transformative Peloponnesian War. Like the philosophical theories of Plato, Aristotle, and others, the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides come across as expressions of a dedicated and sustained effort to really comprehend the world in which we live, and from the mid-fifth to the mid-fourth century, Greek prose was turned into a medium highly capable of containing and conveying such reflection.

## Literature in Greek 300 BCE–400 CE

Alexander's wars became a watershed in Greek history and culture. When his generals and their families carved a number of new states out of the territories that Alexander had conquered, from the eastern Mediterranean to present-day Afghanistan, Greek language and Greek culture consolidated their importance in that vast region. This did not mean that the whole area became Greek. Outside the traditional Greek domains – now provincialized by the new developments – Greek culture was represented by a small elite of Greek emigrants and local upper classes in the major West Asian and Egyptian cities. In certain respects, not least regarding religion, this new Greek culture was deeply affected by the foreign traditions that it encountered. Nevertheless, Greek language and poetry, Greek education, Greek thinking, and Greek architecture came to play an important role, even if the nature and strength of its influence varied from area to area and from period to period. When the whole region came to be governed directly or indirectly by Rome from around the beginning of the Common Era, that did not in itself change the cultural situation in any fundamental way.

Many of the new rulers had considerable cultural ambitions, and important libraries and cultural institutions were founded in Alexandria, Pergamum, Antioch, and other cities. In Alexandria, a veritable research center, the Mouseion (compare the word "museum"), formally a religious institution dedicated to the muses, was probably created in the early third century BCE and had a large library associated with it. The intention of the Greek (Ptolemaic) Egyptian kings behind this venture was to acquire all important works, certainly all works in Greek, and

during its period of greatness, the library is thought to have contained something like 500 000 or 700 000 volumes (volumes meaning, in this context, papyrus rolls). During its first centuries, the researchers of the Mouseion produced pathbreaking results in, for example, astronomy and geography and also important scholarly work in the literary field, for example, critical editions of Homer.

In the Greek-speaking world, Homer occupied a central position in the grammar-school curriculum as the most venerated author, followed by the major Athenian tragic writers: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Outside the school, too, the epic, lyric, and dramatic poets of the classical era were held in high esteem and regarded as extremely significant models. A kind of classicism prevailed in high literary culture: an intimate knowledge of the classics remained a prerequisite for serious literary creativity and appreciation, and new works were read with the classics at the back of one's mind as an instrument of understanding and evaluation. At the same time, however, lighter literary entertainment was in rich supply. Postclassical literature in Greek was copious and varied and, as we shall see, also innovative, but, for whatever reasons, none of its writers ever achieved the same stature as the great authors of the classical period.

In philosophy, the Academy and the Lyceum continued to propagate and transform the Platonic and Aristotelian heritage, but they were joined by new schools, the two most important being the Epicurean and the Stoic, both with their original centers in Athens, which still remained the philosophical capital of the Greek world. For Epicurus (Epikouros, 341–270 BCE), the goal to strive for in life was to attain pleasure and avoid pain, a goal best achieved through a quiet, secluded existence in a circle of friends. Epicurus was influenced by Democritus' materialism and saw humans as clusters of atoms disintegrating in death. Epicurus did not deny the existence of gods, but, for him, gods too consist of atoms, and they do not interfere with human lives. The Stoic tradition, founded by Zeno (Zenon, c. 335–c. 263), believed in a kind of pantheism and determinism. The exercise of reason and the acceptance of fate will give the wise man peace of mind – peace of mind was a central value for both Epicureanism and Stoicism. Both schools – and Platonism and Aristotelianism as well – attracted a multitude of philosophers during our period and could assume different guises. To late European antiquity, philosophy and rhetoric represented the apex of intellectual achievement, so the four philosophical schools exerted considerable intellectual influence. Philosophy had now taken a decisive turn toward moral philosophy, more specifically, toward the question of how we, as individuals, are to live if we wish to conduct a good life.

Apart from philosophical and rhetorical treatises, much other specialized work was published in medicine, linguistics, natural science, and

other branches of knowledge; very few of these texts have been preserved in more than fragments. History writing also remained important. We still possess the early books of the history by Polybius (Polybios, c. 200–c. 118 BCE), who was a high commander in a Peloponnesian alliance opposing the Roman eastward expansion; he was taken to Rome as a hostage in the 160s. In Rome, he moved in the highest circles and accompanied the Roman commander Scipio Aemilianus during the Third Punic War, which ended with the fall and destruction of Carthage in 146 and Rome's undisputed control of the western Mediterranean area. Polybius' history, focused on the Roman rise to dominance, followed the Roman and Greek world from the early third until the mid-second century and offered an inside perspective on Rome and its politics to Greek-speaking readers. Plutarch (Plutarchos, 46–after 119 CE) is best known for his sequence of parallel biographies presenting and then comparing pairs of prominent Greeks and Romans: Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, Demosthenes and Cicero, and so on.

The postclassical era has often been associated with a new emphasis on the individual and on private life. The demise of the city-state reduced the importance of unquestioning loyalty to your homeland, and the emergence of a wider Hellenized world opened dramatically better opportunities for international careers. One's beliefs and customs, and the company one kept, became more the result of personal choice, less of a natural consequence of where one was born. Religion, too, was personalized to a larger extent than before. Influences from the Orient – Egypt, Babylon, and Persia – blended with Greek religious traditions. Mystery cults spread widely; such cults were organized around myths relating to a specific deity – like the Egyptian goddess Isis, or the god Mithras, probably the Persian Mithra – and new members were initiated into the mysteries through special ceremonies.

The classical Greco-Roman world was polytheistic. It accepted that many gods existed side by side and could also, in postclassical times, worship emperors as gods. This is, however, also the period when Christianity, offering its own monotheistic explanation of life, came into being. Jesus, a wandering preacher or prophet whose religious teachings were in part incompatible with the Judaism of his time, was born c. 6–4 BCE in Bethlehem in Palestine and crucified in Jerusalem by the Roman authorities c. 30. According to Christian belief, Jesus is the son of God – the only god – and after his crucifixion rose from his grave and ascended into heaven. Jesus himself produced no writings, but some of his followers described his life and acts in Greek (the gospels ascribed to the four evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), and Paul, the most prominent early organizer of the Christian communities growing up in the Greco-Roman world, wrote epistles to these congregations, addressing questions connected with the Christian faith and Christian life, this

too in Greek. These texts, mostly stemming from the latter part of the first century CE, form the core of the New Testament, the exclusively Christian part of the Christian Bible. The Old Testament, the Christian Bible's first part, is mostly identical with the Hebrew Bible, the sacred books of the Jewish people. The Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek during the third and second centuries BCE, probably in Alexandria, where a large Jewish colony existed; tradition has it that 72 translators independently of each other produced exactly the same translated text, the so-called Septuagint – from Latin "septuaginta," seventy. Christianity did not become a dominating religious force until later, however, and before its ascendancy, Christians were often persecuted, despite the prevailing religious tolerance. Christianity and Judaism both taught the belief in one God and did not condone the worshiping of other presumed gods; when one such god was the emperor, this created a serious problem. The first Christian hagiographies – texts describing the lives and sufferings of Christian saints – belong to the second century CE.

We have dwelled at length on the general intellectual background of postclassical Greek literature; it is now time to turn to our main subject, the poetic arts.

Epic remained the most prestigious genre, but many minor types of verse, whether lyric or narrative, were also cultivated by many greatly admired writers. Best known today of the Greek poets of these centuries is Theocritus (Theokritos, c. 300–after 260 BCE), famous particularly for his "idylls" (*eidyllia*; literally: "little images"), relatively short narrative poems rich in dialogue, depicting situations among ordinary people. Several of these idylls are set in nature, among herdsmen, and those poems gave rise to the bucolic or pastoral genre (named after the respective Greek and Latin words for shepherd or herdsman: *boukolos* and *pastor*). Theocritus, a Sicilian, is known to have stayed for longer periods in the eastern Mediterranean area, also in Alexandria, but unlike several other noted poets of the time, he does not seem to have had any close relationship with the Mouseion.

One of those other poets was Apollonius Rhodius, superintendent of the library in Alexandria in the mid-third century BCE. He is the author of an epic on the Argonauts – that is, on the expedition of Jason and his companions to Colchis to bring back the Golden Fleece, the myth briefly touched upon above in connection with Euripides' *Medea*. Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautika* (*Argonautica*), naturally in hexameters, exploits and modernizes the Homeric model; his epic, widely read at the time, seems to have revived the genre. Callimachus, an older contemporary of Apollonius Rhodius, was an outstanding scholar at the Alexandrine library and a productive poet. His most important literary work was a large collection of poems narrating myths that explain names and customs, *Aitia* (*Causes*).

A learned and highly polished character was typical of the leading poets of the time, not least of those associated with the Mouseion. Much Greek verse from the so-called Hellenistic age (323–30 BCE), particularly the works of Callimachus, Theocritus, and Apollonius Rhodius, was a significant source of influence when Roman writers eventually assimilated Greek poetic culture and also created a new, Latin, literary tradition. For example, the superb craftsmanship of Callimachus played an important role for Catullus and his circle, and Virgil continued the pastoral tradition initiated by Theocritus in his first book of poems, the *Bucolics* or *Eclogues*.

Greek drama also lived on, but in partly new forms. Theaters were built in every important city in the Hellenized area. Dramas were performed particularly in connection with public festivals, the performers now mostly being professional companies, hired for the occasion. Classical tragedies and comedies formed part of the repertoire, but theaters were also used for lighter spectacles: entertainment focused on dance, or music, or song. New tragedies and comedies continued to be written and performed, particularly in Athens, at least until the first century BCE. With the new prominence of writing, dramas could now also be composed to be read rather than performed, an increasingly important practice exemplified as early as in the fourth century BCE.

Athenian comedy from the later fourth century and the third century BCE, the "New Comedy," developed the genre in a new direction. Explicit political and ideological discussion disappeared – perhaps because Athens was not really an autonomous city-state any longer but de facto under the rule of the kings of Macedonia – as well as the obscenity often found in Aristophanes. Instead, comedies centered on issues in upper-middle-class Athenian private life, sometimes themes that would prove, over centuries and millennia, well-nigh impossible to wear out. For example, young couples could be hindered in their love by prejudiced elders but be helped by clever, inventive, and irreverent servants and be finally united after a series of complications, events that were often combined with incidents of mistaken identities. Or a misanthropist, a miser, or the exemplar of some other human type could have his attitudes and behavior exposed on the stage to good comic effect.

The acknowledged master of the new subgenre was Menander (Menandros, c. 342–c. 292 BCE), of whom the early work *Dyskolos* (*The Peevish Fellow*; 316 BCE), also called *Misanthropist*, has survived in its entirety, together with large parts of five other comedies. *The Peevish Fellow* is set in the Athenian countryside; at its center, we find a shrine dedicated to Pan (god of the wilderness, of shepherds, and of fertility). The play features a comical character-type and also offers a story of young love. Knemon, the peevish fellow, lives a life of hard labor on his middle-sized farm together with his young, unspoilt daughter and an

elderly female servant; he hates all contact with other people and has a terrible temper. Sostratos, a young man living in town, but the son of a very rich local farmer, visits the neighborhood to hunt. The god Pan has much sympathy for Knemon's (unnamed) daughter, who cares lovingly for the nymphs who share Pan's shrine, and he puts young Sostratos under a spell that makes him fall hopelessly in love with her. Various relatives of Knemon and Sostratos swarm around the shrine. Knemon, whose house is nearby, is given rich opportunities to vent his uncontrolled anger, but is taken to task for this with suitable means and eventually reintegrated into the community; Sostratos, who has had a hard time attempting to ask Knemon for his daughter's hand, is finally united with her in marriage.

Menander was awarded first prize for this comedy at an Athenian festival in 316. Modern critics have often thought more highly of Menander's later work, particularly *Epitrepontes* (*Court of Arbitration*), and frowned on *The Peevish Fellow*, where both psychology and plot leave room for improvement. However, its contagious good humor makes the success of the play fully understandable. If there is an ideology behind the comedy – the piece must, first and foremost, have been meant to be entertaining – it should be a belief in the need for people to come together and form a community. The ridiculing and reforming of Knemon can perhaps be taken as criticism of excessive individualism, while the introduction of a marital alliance between a rich and a poor person, wholly supported by both fathers, can be seen as a way of advocating social cohesion. And the community seems to enjoy divine blessing: the god Pan, worshiped by all, is watching over the action and the small circle of village people, even though he may not be so very dignified and is clearly a bit of a trickster.

*The Peevish Fellow* belongs univocally to the realm of fiction. If "fictional," when used in a literary context, is taken to mean not merely the "untrue" but, approximately, that which is understood, by author and reader/spectator alike, as being the author's invention, none of the Greek texts treated earlier was as definitely a piece of fictional discourse. The ancient heroic stories retold in epic and tragedy were probably felt to have a historical core – remember Thucydides' reflections on the Trojan War – and the myths will have preserved an association with the divine sphere, even if authors could give them new facets or develop them in new directions. It is true that the comedies of Aristophanes will certainly have been fictional in the above sense – for example, *Lysistrata* – but they were still not very far from being commentaries on phenomena in contemporary Athenian life. Aesopian fables were no doubt also fictional, but at the same time, concise moral wisdom, often plainly stated.

The sources of the fictional in ancient Greek poetic and narrative culture are hard to trace with confidence, particularly since the character

of the oral genres of these early times is so difficult to ascertain, but the emergence of straightforwardly fictional discourse is interesting to note. Such discourse enjoyed relatively limited cultural prestige – even though Menander became a kind of classic, often thought to equal or surpass Aristophanes – but it gained a foothold in the Greek world of texts. Long fictional narratives in prose also began to be written: the ancient Greek novel.

The earliest specimens of this new genre, which lacked a name in European antiquity, were composed in the first century BCE. The novels are thought to have catered to interests in adventure and romance in a readership that comprised both members of the literate and Hellenized middle classes and representatives of higher strata of society, women as well as men. Among the many types of text that may have influenced the early Greek novel are historical writings: contemporary history-writing could include purely invented material, sometimes of a romantic nature, and the first novels are all historical novels. Fantastic tales of voyages also played an important part in Greek culture from the *Odyssey* onwards – undoubtedly inspired, ultimately, by oral storytelling – and adventurous traveling, whether by land or sea, is a prominent element in the novel of European antiquity.

The oldest extant novel is *Ta peri Kallirhoen dignemata* (*The Story of Callirhoe*), also known as *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, written by an otherwise unknown author, Chariton. In the novel, Callirhoe is the daughter of a historical ruler of Syracuse in Sicily, Hermocrates. She is the most beautiful girl in the world, and she marries the love of her life, the handsome and capable Chaereas, but then a series of unforeseen events occur. Callirhoe, who appears to be dead following an unhappy incident, is buried alive, but she is found and taken away by pirates robbing her tomb and sold as a slave to a magnate in Miletus, who falls in love with Callirhoe and marries her. Chaereas, however, tracks her down, and the conflict between the two men over Callirhoe becomes a main driving force in the novel. The extensive complications take us to Babylon and the Persian high king Artaxerxes; to Egypt, where Chaereas is entrusted with a military command; to Phoenicia, where Chaereas fights the Persians and finally wins Callirhoe back. At the end, we find Callirhoe and Chaereas reunited in Syracuse. This can sound like a rather tasteless narrative, but *The Story of Callirhoe* is in fact a far more cultivated and psychologically nuanced novel than one would suspect judging only from a summary of its plot.

Most of the early Greek novels are full of adventure, but not all. *Daphnis kai Chloe* (*Daphnis and Chloe*) is a special case. In a pastoral milieu in Lesbos, Daphnis and Chloe are raised in the houses of two farming couples. Daphnis and Chloe do not know that they are foundlings, abandoned in the countryside with fine clothes showing that they come from

rich families, then found and cared for by the farmers. The two children grow up in the peaceful rural neighborhood where they herd sheep and goats together and fall in love. The author follows them closely through their days and the varying seasons, observing the signs of love and of erotic longing that begin to be visible, tracing the development of a passion that remains entirely chaste until their wedding at the end, when Daphnis finally can make use of what a local woman has taught him about the art of lovemaking. There is some drama in *Daphnis and Chloe* too, even though that element plays a more subordinate role. Daphnis has a rural rival whom he manages to neutralize; there is an attack from pirates and an attack from a neighboring city, both finally without dire consequences. A more serious threat arises when the lord of the estate comes to visit with his son because one of the attendants of the son wishes to move Chloe to town and use her as his lover. In this critical situation, the two farmers display the pieces of clothing that they found with the babies, and it is discovered that Daphnis is the lord's own son and Chloe the daughter of a leading citizen of Mytilene. This paves the way for Daphnis and Chloe's wedding – but the young couple prefers to go on living in the countryside, watching over their flocks, despite their dramatically increased social status. The author of this artistically more refined novel is Longus, also nothing more than a name to us, and the time of writing possibly c. 200 CE. Herdsmen in idyllic landscapes naturally recall the bucolic poetry of Theocritus, and Longus also sometimes openly alludes to the much earlier poet.

## Ancient Rome

### Latin Literature Before 100 BCE

Rome's expansion during the last three centuries BCE brought the new major power into closer contact with Greek culture – first with the Greek settlements in southern Italy and Sicily, then with mainland Greece and the larger Hellenic culture in the eastern Mediterranean. Rome subdued the Greeks militarily everywhere; from a cultural point of view, however, Rome met with a level of civilization to which it could itself, in the beginning, only aspire, and Greek literature, art, and religion came to have a profound impact on Rome. If one looks extremely broadly at the development, the history of Latin literature up to 100 BCE can be seen as representing, largely, a successive assimilation of Greek models. During the first century BCE, then, poetry, history, and oratory flourished; this is the time of Cicero, Catullus, Virgil, Ovid, and Horace. Several of these, first of all Virgil and Cicero, more or less instantly attained the status of great classics. After this golden age there followed, in the early centuries CE, a less innovative period. The outline just given is of course only an

extremely crude description of the development up to 400 CE, and it will be modified in many respects in the following, but the division of Latin literature into three large segments will be maintained: before 100 BCE, first century BCE, and first four centuries CE.

Native Roman literary culture all but disappeared in the encounter with the Greeks. Archaic Roman literature is practically unknown to us, although we possess some information about cults and entertainments, both influenced by the Etruscans under whose dominion Rome remained, practically speaking, until around 500 BCE. The performance of two plays by Livius Andronicus in 240 BCE, a tragedy and a comedy – an event already referred to in the introductory section about Europe above – was understood by the later Romans themselves as marking the beginning of Latin literature. We do not know what two plays were produced, but a number of titles of Livius' tragedies survive, together with some lines quoted by later authors, and his dramas appear to have been adaptations of Greek tragedies or epics.

Livius Andronicus' translation of the *Odyssey* is also not preserved, but some verses are known, and it is clear that Livius used a native Latin meter, the Saturnian, a meter known from Latin oracles and hymns. Livius is said to have worked as a teacher, and it has been suggested that his translation was made for school purposes. The reading and explicating of authors regarded as classics was a cornerstone in the Greek system of education. When this type of schooling was transferred to Rome, poetry in Latin that could be regarded as classical was absolutely essential if the system were to work properly.

Another important early innovator in Latin poetry was Ennius (Quintus Ennius, 239–169 BCE) from Calabria in southern Italy, a native speaker of Oscan, an Italic language, with a Greek education. Ennius translated and adapted Greek tragedies, but he also introduced hexameter into Latin and used that prestigious meter in a large epic about the history of Rome from the beginnings up to his own time. This work, the *Annales* (*Annals*), of which only 600 lines remain, long served as the national epic of Rome.

Ennius, too, worked as a (well-connected) teacher in Rome, and the demand for Greek teachers increased with time. Knowledge of Greek became a matter of course for well-educated Romans, and schools working in Greek began to exist in parallel with schools operating in Latin. Members of the Roman nobility might even employ private Greek tutors. We earlier glimpsed the fact that, as a Greek hostage in Rome, the officer-turned-historian Polybius served Lucius Aemilius Paullus Macedonicus in that capacity in the mid-second century BCE. (Aemilius Paullus, twice consul, commanded the Roman army that crushed the kingdom of Macedonia in 168, obliterating the old homeland of Alexander the Great as a sovereign state.)

Greek models also came to play a very significant role in the world of entertainment. In their contacts with the Greek cities in southern Italy, Romans encountered theaters and various dramatic forms: tragedy and comedy but also less prestigious varieties such as farce and mime. A number of religious festivals existed in Rome, and the performance of plays became a standing feature in several of these after the introduction of tragedy and comedy into the most important festival, the Roman Games or *Ludi Romani*, in 240 BCE. Temporary constructions had to be erected for each performance because the first permanent theaters in Rome were only built in the first century BCE. By then, tragedy and comedy, although still in existence, had begun to be overshadowed by farce and mime and other types of theatrical entertainment, but during the third and second centuries BCE, tragedy and comedy were fully alive. Tragedies and comedies were written by a number of authors and performed, as in the Greek-speaking world, by professional groups, hired for the occasion by the magistrates responsible for a given festival. However, the only remaining dramas from this period are comedies: 20 plays by Plautus (Titus Maccius Plautus, c. 254–184 BCE) and 6 by Terence (Publius Terentius Afer, c. 195–c. 159 BCE).

Plautus and Terence are both profoundly dependent on Greek New Comedy, that is, on Menander and his colleagues and competitors. The form of Plautus' and Terence's comedies is virtually identical to the one we know from what is left of Greek New Comedy, and the content is adapted from New Comedy plays. A comedy in Latin was expected to be an adaptation of some specific Greek comedy, and any given Greek comedy was expected to be adapted in Latin only once. Adaptation did not mean translation: where experts have been able to compare a Greek original with a Latin adaptation, it appears that the Latin writer used his source more freely than that. On the other hand, nor did adaptation mean that the plot and setting was transposed from Athens to Rome: Plautus' and Terence's comedies move in Athens and feature Athenian characters. Comedies set in Rome also existed and constituted the subgenre *fabula togata*, named after the *toga*, the large loose piece of woolen cloth worn by male Romans in public. No such plays have been preserved, however, only specimens of the *fabula palliata*: plays set in Athens, with actors in Athenians' everyday dress.

We know little about the lives of Plautus and Terence; even the approximate dates given above are slightly uncertain. Sources from antiquity are not entirely unanimous, but they tend to say that Plautus stemmed from north-eastern central Italy and that he worked in a grain mill for some time. Terence is supposed to have been brought to Rome from Carthage as a slave by a Roman senator who gave his talented servant a good education and eventually set him free. All we seem to know about men like Livius, Ennius, Plautus, and Terence indicates that creativity in the poetic

arts in Latin was at this time the domain of relative outsiders – people who were not native Romans and not of the upper classes, and who depended on the good will and support of the nobility or the magistrates.

The comedies of Plautus play out in a high tempo and are close to the farcical and burlesque. As an example of a play by Plautus, we will use *Mostellaria* (*The Haunted House*), thought to be an adaptation of a Greek comedy called *Phasma* (*The Ghost*, possibly by a playwright called Philemon). In *The Haunted House*, set in front of two houses in a street in Athens, young Philolaches is squandering his father's fortune on feasting while the father is abroad on a long business journey. Philolaches has fallen in love with a slave girl, Philematium, and bought her free from her owner for a small fortune; at the present moment, Philolaches is at home drinking together with his friend Callidamates, Philematium, and Callidamates' girlfriend. Tranio, one of the father's slaves, is Philolaches' right-hand man, and when it becomes known that the father has completely unexpectedly returned to Athens and been seen in the harbor, Tranio takes command and does his best to save the day. When the father arrives at his house – one of the two Athenian houses – he finds it locked up and Tranio, standing in front of it, tells him that the house has not been lived in for seven months, since it is now haunted by the ghost of a man murdered by the previous owner. A visit to the man from whom he bought the house makes the father doubt this story even more than he did at first, and on his speedy return, he finds Tranio with a usurer who has come for the interest on money lent to Philolaches. Tranio immediately invents an explanation: Philolaches has indeed borrowed some money but only to buy the neighbor's very good house – the other house on the scene – at a favorable price. Tranio's thin stories unravel dramatically and hopelessly, but all ends well: Callidamates promises to restore all the squandered money and talks the furious father into forgiving both Philolaches and Tranio.

It would be difficult to deny that *The Haunted House* is funny. The absurd attitudes of the characters create a comical effect. So do Tranio's ingenious but transparent lies; so does the repartee; so does the very rapidity of the events, which makes them seem uncontrollable. The main characters, drawn with a few determined strokes of the brush, are caricatures, but they are quite human and, in fact, also composite, none of them all good or all bad. Philolaches is completely thoughtless but full of love for his girl, the father gullible and irascible but ultimately competent and open to other points of view, and so on. What *The Haunted House* seeks to provide is clearly fun and entertainment; still, one should not underestimate the complexity of the experience that the play has to offer.

Terence employs less strong effects and invites more reflection. In *Adelphoi* (*The Brothers*) – also, unsurprisingly, set in front of two houses in a street in Athens – we are confronted with two pairs of brothers.

Demea has two sons, Aeschinus and Ctesipho. Demea has let Aeschinus be raised by his brother Micio, while Ctesipho has stayed with Demea. Both Demea and Micio appear to be well off, but Micio – owner of one of the two Athenian houses – treats young Aeschinus much as a friend, refraining from exerting strong fatherly authority over him and hoping that Aeschinus' good nature will lead him to make the right choices in life. Demea, on the contrary, who has a farm near Athens, gives Ctesipho a very strict upbringing and tries to keep him away from the temptations of the city. Two kinds of education are consequently pitted against one another, and the play must be said to sympathize entirely with Micio's more humane approach. In this case, the Greek drama behind the Latin play is a comedy by Menander, *Adelphoi*. However, Terence has added a scene from another Greek comedy, Diphilus' *Synapothneskontes*, an unorthodox move which he defends in his prologue.

In *The Brothers*, Ctesipho loves a young girl, a zither player. Aeschinus helps him by buying the girl from the pimp who owns her and taking her home to Micio's house. However, Aeschinus loves a young girl living in the neighboring house (the other house on the scene). He has even made her pregnant, but promised to marry her, much to her widowed mother's relief. When Aeschinus is spotted smuggling a completely new girl into Micio's house, this gives rise to serious misunderstandings next door and also supplies Demea with a cherished opportunity to strongly condemn Aeschinus' recklessness and Micio's way of bringing him up. A happy end is in store for both the young couples, of course, and in a less expected twist Demea, tired of being criticized and unloved, discovers that one can gain sympathy by such simple means as being generous. Demea then begins to suggest generous things that his brother should do, and his suggestions win general acclaim so that Micio feels forced to comply. In the end, prodded by Demea, the company even convinces the inveterate bachelor Micio that he must marry the widow next door, the mother of Aeschinus' fiancée. This is elegant comedy and perhaps also food for thought.

Gaius Lucilius (c. 180–c. 103/102 BCE) was not from Rome – he was born in Campania, and he died in Naples – but he was a Roman citizen and spent a good deal of his life in Rome. Lucilius was a well-educated man of good family – a brother of his was a senator. Lucilius served Rome briefly in a war in Spain but mostly preferred to live as a private citizen in his house in Rome or on his estates. He started writing relatively late in life, and with his unusually independent position he obviously felt free to express himself with great liberty about all sorts of phenomena in social life. Lucilius also had little respect for generic norms, and his poems, displaying mixed forms and mixed subjects, were later characterized as "satire," as were some of Ennius' smaller works. The term "satire" goes back to the Latin word *satura*, which could be used about various

things in which different items were crammed together – a kind of fruit dish; a kind of sausage; a kind of law – so the diversity of Lucilius' forms and subjects may, originally, have been the main reason for calling his books satires. Later, of course, "satire" came to be associated more with the satirical content of writings in this genre – a genre considered to be, essentially, a Roman invention, not a Greek import.

Roman poets from the upper classes were scarce. Prose, particularly history, was a different matter; for centuries, Roman history was written by statesmen. Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BCE) was the first Roman to write history in Latin – earlier Roman history works existed, from the third century BCE, but in Greek. Cato – often referred to as Cato the Elder, for he also had a famous grandson – came from Latium, the Roman heartland, but not from Rome itself. He was of relatively humble origin but made a formidable political and military career, rising to the highest offices of the Roman state (consul; censor). Although well-educated and a famous speaker – Cato was the first really important Roman orator and his speeches were disseminated in written form; they were known and admired by Cicero – Cato was wary of Greek influences and stood, in an almost reactionary fashion, for traditional Roman ideals. His history work, *Origines* (*Origins*), treated the earliest, partly legendary, history of Rome and other Italian cities. Only fragments of the *Origins* remain, but another prose discourse by Cato, *De agri cultura* (*On Farming*, c. 160 BCE), survives intact.

## First-Century BCE Latin Poetry and Prose

By the first century BCE, Greek impulses had penetrated deeply into Roman cultural life. The wars in the eastern Mediterranean had a part in this. Greek libraries had been brought to Rome as spoils of war – for example, Aemilius Paullus appropriated King Perseus' library after his army's victory over Macedonia – and many Greek *grammatici*, rhetors, and philosophers had come to Rome, uprooted by the wars or just seeking a promising career. The knowledge of Greek among educated Romans was never more advanced, and some, like Cicero (Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106–43 BCE), seem to have been, in practice, bilingual.

As mentioned earlier, Rome was plagued by fierce internal power struggles, or outright civil war, during much of the century. Nevertheless, a number of excellent writers brought Latin poetry and prose to unprecedented heights, partly, no doubt, thanks to the affluence and the raised cultural level of the Roman elite. We will first look at the prose writers, particularly Cicero, then at the poetic production.

Cicero was not primarily an author but a politician. He came from Arpinum (now Arpino) southeast of Rome, and his family, though locally important, did not belong to the nobility. Brought to more illustrious

connections in Rome for his education, the talented young man was given the means and the backing to make a mark in public life, his rhetorical skills compensating for his relative lack of eminent social background. Cicero worked as an advocate, mostly for the defense, and proved himself in several high-profile cases. He held a number of public offices and was made consul at the lowest possible age, 43, in 63 BCE. During his consulate, he was able to discover and forestall a coup d'état planned by the senator Catiline and his circle and was honored with the title Father of the Fatherland, *pater patriae*. This was the pinnacle of Cicero's political career; serious problems were to follow. The Catiline affair ended with a backlash, and Cicero was faced with confiscation of property and a short period of exile, but worse trouble would come. Cicero had always been a stern supporter of the republican political system, and he could feel no sympathy for the growing influence of strong men like Caesar who threatened to wrest power out of the hands of the Roman Senate. In his propaganda against these warlords from the nobility, Cicero was on the losing side, and his opposition to Caesar's successors after Caesar's murder finally cost him his life: in the course of fleeing to Greece, he was run down by Marcus Antonius' men and killed, his head and hands cut off to be exposed in Rome's main square, the *forum Romanum*.

Cicero is thus a figure in Roman history, but his place in a history of literature is motivated by his speeches, his rhetorical and philosophical treatises, and his letters. The texts of more than 800 of his letters are preserved – letters to family and close relatives but also to other public figures – and they offer a vivid picture of a highly intelligent, spirited, moody, and vain man and of his times and surroundings. The treatises are of course more deliberated. Probably as a teenager, c. 88 BCE, Cicero had already written a shorter work related to rhetoric, *De inventione* (*On Invention*). Later treatises, mainly in the form of dialogues, typically belong to periods when the political situation made it attractive for Cicero to leave Rome and withdraw to his country villa, pursuing his very genuine intellectual interests. From around 55 BCE, failing to rally the Senate against Caesar, he produced a series of works, among others *De oratore* (*On the Orator*), one of his main rhetorical treatises. During Caesar's rule as dictator, a new spate of treatises in the mid-40s included *Brutus*, offering a kind of history of Roman eloquence. His important philosophical treatise *De officiis* (*On Moral Duties*), which is not a dialogue, was composed in Cicero's very last years, after the assassination of Caesar.

Cicero was – and is – regarded as a grand master of Latin prose, indeed, as the creator of its classical form. Stylistically he excelled in the use of complex, carefully built sentences, so-called periods, in prose rhythm, and in the use of metaphor. Let us look at a small example of Cicero's style: the opening sentences of *Orator* (46 BCE), a work formed

as a letter to Brutus (Marcus Junius Brutus, 85 [probably]–42 BCE, one of the later killers of Caesar) in answer to the question of what characterizes the perfect speaker (translation by H.M. Hubbell).

> Utrum difficilius aut maius esset negare tibi saepius idem roganti an efficere id quod rogares diu multumque, Brute, dubitavi. Nam et negare ei quem unice diligerem cuique me carissimum esse sentirem, praesertim et iusta petenti et praeclara cupienti, durum admodum mihi videbatur; et suscipere tantam rem, quantam non modo facultate consequi difficile esset sed etiam cogitatione complecti, vix arbitrabar esse eius qui vereretur reprehensionem doctorum atque prudentium. Quid enim est. maius quam, cum tanta sit inter oratores bonos dissimilitudo, iudicare quae sit optima species et quasi figura dicendi?
>
> For a long time I debated earnestly with myself, Brutus, as to which course would be more difficult or more serious – to deny your oft repeated request, or to do what you ask. For it seemed hard indeed to refuse one whom I whole-heartedly love, and who I know returns my affection, especially since his request is reasonable and his curiosity honourable; and to undertake a task so great as to be difficult to attain in practice or even to grasp with the imagination seemed hardly the act of a man who respects the opinions of the learned and judicious. For what greater task can there be than to decide what is the finest ideal and type of oratory, when good orators exhibit such variety?

The opening sentence names the addressee and hints at a problematic request from him, but not until the third sentence does the reader learn what Cicero is being asked to do: the rhetorical question which ends the quote presupposes that the task is to decide what is the finest ideal and type of oratory. A certain amount of tension exists from the first moment, since we are told of a difficult request but its content is not yet disclosed, and the tension is made even more perceptible by the two antitheses: to deny your request or to do what you ask and to refuse one Cicero loves or to undertake a task so great as to be difficult to attain. The reader is immediately introduced to the spirit of discussion with oneself, of grappling with intricate problems, which will characterize the text. There is also something of a declaration of the author's inability to shoulder the task, a declaration apt to arouse the reader's sympathy. True, Cicero cannot credibly portray himself as being ignorant in matters regarding the art of rhetoric, but he can describe the task as immensely difficult,

difficult even to grasp with the imagination. Repeated reference is made to the greatness of the task and to Cicero's hesitation about taking it on: he does not address this important problem lightly. Both the task (immensely great) and Cicero (obviously a man of good judgment) are put in a favorable light, while the subject of the text is being introduced in an engaging, almost dramatic, manner.

In the Latin text, the first sentence contains its own linguistic version of tensions finally resolved. The doubts of Cicero are presented only at the very end, with the finite verb (*dubitavi*), and the addressee only just before that (*Brute*); what goes before is the question of whether it is more difficult or greater to deny you what you so often ask for or to grant it to you. Only the last word makes the meaning clear. The second sentence, a "period," is particularly complex. Not until the sentence is completed can we see that its two halves hold up to us two alternatives, both difficult: to disappoint Brutus or to try to achieve the impossible. In addition, both halves of the sentence are complex enough in themselves, stuffed with dependent clauses and intricate qualifications of the main words ("a task *so great as to be difficult to attain in practice or even to grasp with the imagination*"; "tantam rem, *quantam non modo facultate consequi difficile esset sed etiam cogitatione complecti*"). One of the impressions no doubt meant to be projected by this kind of style is that of intellectual competence: the ability to master and organize intrinsically complex matters.

But Cicero was first of all a speaker, and public speaking was not idle verbal display. Cicero was often called upon to make use of his oratorical skills in legal or political affairs of the utmost importance for those involved, sometimes in matters of life or death. During the Catiline crisis in 63 BCE, Cicero delivered a series of speeches against Catiline; the first of these is particularly famous. The conspirators had rallied forces in Etruria, but Catiline himself was still in Rome (he was killed in Tuscany the next year in a battle against loyalist troops). Cicero knew about his role in the conspiracy, but lacked proof substantial enough to have him arrested. On November 7, the conspirators had planned to have Cicero killed in his home, but Cicero, forewarned, had made sure that he was heavily defended. On November 8, Cicero convened the Senate to discuss the situation. Catiline attended the meeting, and Cicero made his opening speech into a furious attack on his adversary. He began thus (translation by C. Macdonald):

> Quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra? quam diu etiam furor iste tuus nos eludet? quem ad finem sese effrenata iactabit audacia? Nihilne te nocturnum praesidium Palati, nihil urbis vigiliae, nihil timor populi, nihil concursus bonorum omnium, nihil hic munitissimus habendi senatus locus, nihil horum ora voltusque moverunt? Patere tua consilia non sentis, constrictam iam horum omnium

> scientia teneri coniurationem tuam non vides? Quid proxima, quid superiore nocte egeris, ubi fueris, quos convocaveris, quid consili ceperis quem nostrum ignorare arbitraris? O tempora, o mores! Senatus haec intellegit, consul videt; hic tamen vivit. Vivit? immo vero etiam in senatum venit, fit publici consili particeps, notat et designat oculis ad caedem unum quemque nostrum.
>
> In heaven's name, Catiline, how long will you take advantage of our forbearance? How much longer yet will that madness of yours make playthings of us? When will your unbridled effrontery stop vaunting itself? Are you impressed not at all that the Palatine has a garrison at night, that the city is patrolled, that the populace is panic-stricken, that all loyal citizens have rallied to the standard, that the Senate is meeting here behind stout defences, and that you can see the expression on the faces of the senators? Do you not appreciate that your plans are laid bare? Do you not see that your conspiracy is held fast by the knowledge of all these men? Do you think that there is a man among us who does not know what you did last night or the night before last, where you were, whom you summoned to your meeting, what decision you reached? What an age we live in! The Senate knows it all, the consul sees it, and yet – this man is still alive. Alive, did I say? Not only is he alive, but he attends the Senate, takes part in our debates, picks us all out one by one and with his gaze marks us down for death.

Part of Cicero's message is being conveyed by the form rather than the content. Cicero's almost frenzied opening sends the signal that he is in full vigor and on the offensive. His volley of rhetorical questions – six in a row – is apt to make the listener feel that Cicero is brimming over with indignation and surprise that he is questioning Catiline fundamentally and that Catiline has much to answer for. There is also an insidious strategy of supposition behind Cicero's questions. The first three questions simply presuppose and take it as proven facts that Catiline has abused his fellow senators' patience and that he behaves without restraint and recklessly – it is only unclear how long Catiline will go on behaving like this. The uncompromising repetition of the word "nothing" ("nihil") in the third sentence – it recurs six times – is bound to create the feeling that negative things are piling up intolerably, and at the end of the quote, Cicero skillfully turns Catiline's very existence into a menace: every glance from Catiline, Cicero tells us, is a death threat. Cicero's pithy formulations add effectiveness to his speech. Both the opening

question "Quo usque tandem, Catilina, abutere patientia nostra?" and the rhetorical exclamation "O tempora, o mores!" ("Oh, these times; oh, these manners!") have become winged words and were well known among educated Europeans as long as Latin remained fundamental to European schooling. Latin, with its rich system of inflections, also makes it easier to produce strong, condensed formulations; note that Cicero's seven words in his first question are rendered by thirteen words in the English translation.

Unfortunately, it is not certain whether Cicero ever uttered those words, even though it is certain that he wrote them. It was normal practice to make speeches public in written form only a certain time after the event, after the text had been more or less carefully edited by the orator, and Cicero's speeches against Catiline were only released by their author in the summer of 60 BCE. This, of course, made all sorts of later improvements of the original speeches possible.

Oratory was serious business, and rhetoric was the capstone of the education of a young man from the ruling classes. Roman boys, and perhaps also girls, were expected to pick up basic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic from a professional teacher, a *litterator* or *ludi magister*, but the real depth and extent of Roman literacy during different periods is difficult to gauge. Children whose parents could afford the expense could go on to study grammar for a *grammaticus*; for all practical purposes, this meant the reading and interpretation of poetry and historical narratives in order to gain a deeper knowledge of language and culture. In their teens, young upper-class men went on to study rhetoric for three or four years with a Greek *rhetor*, studies that might be followed by more individual, advanced study of rhetoric and/or philosophy, perhaps even in Greece or elsewhere in the Hellenized world. (Cicero spent two years when he was already in his later 20s in Athens, Asia Minor, and Rhodes, studying rhetoric and philosophy under the guidance of fine experts.) This type of liberal education was expected to make the young Roman upper-class male fit for any type of career, preferably as a holder of public offices, and/or a military commander, and/or an advocate.

It should come as no surprise, then, that men of the Roman upper classes often had a highly respectable literary competence. Many combined their career in public life with the pursuit of poetry or history – and their capacity as orators was of course always used in one way or another. With some, their intellectual interests gained the upper hand. Varro (Marcus Terentius Varro, 116–27 BCE) performed honorable military and political service but came to devote himself more and more to poetry and oratory and, most of all, to every aspect of Roman antiquities. His 74 works are largely lost, but his researches were of fundamental importance for the knowledge of early Roman history and culture and established a groundwork on which later writers

would build. Others cultivated literary activities on the side and often with practical aims in sight. Caesar was known as an excellent speaker and prose writer, and he has given historical accounts of his most important military achievements in his partly preserved *Commentarii de bello gallico* (*The Gallic Wars*) and *Commentarii de bello civili* (*The Civil War*); in his youth, he even wrote a tragedy, *Oedipus*, now lost.

Two important Roman historians were active during the first century: Sallust and Livy. Sallust (Gaius Sallustius Crispus, c. 85–35/34 BCE) had a checkered political and military career behind him, with a governorship in North Africa as its acme, when he retired to civil life in 44 BCE and wrote two influential historical works centered on specific wars and individual figures: *Bellum Catilinae* (*Catiline's War*, 43–42 BCE) and *Bellum Jugurthinum* (*The Jugurthine War*, 41–40 BCE) – Jugurtha was a king of Numidia in North Africa in the late second century BCE who fought an unsuccessful war with Rome. Livy (Titus Livius, c. 59/64 BCE–17 CE) is not known to have held any public office, unlike the writers mentioned earlier in this section. His life work was a history of Rome from the beginnings up to his own time; it comprised 142 books, but only fragments and summaries are known of the parts after book 45 which brings the history up to 167 BCE. Livy paid much attention to personalities and morality; his work is commonly associated with the moral restoration that Augustus attempted to achieve after his accession to imperial power. Contemporary Roman history was a sensitive subject under the new autocracy, however, and Livy's last 20 books, covering the period from 31 to 9 BCE, were published only after Augustus' death in 14 CE.

The first century BCE was also the golden age of Latin poetry. Drama did not really contribute to this flourishing: tragedies and comedies continued to be written and to be performed in connection with the various annual games or other celebrations, and a couple of permanent theaters were being constructed in Rome, but in the theater, tragedy and comedy had begun to be overshadowed by farce and mime and other types of entertainment. Epic and lyric poetry, however, attracted important talents.

As already mentioned, well-educated Romans had gone through a considerable amount of literary training, and many had acquired more or less serious literary interests. Poetry readings might form part of the after-dinner entertainment in wealthy homes, and the upper-class Roman might compose verse himself or support poets who celebrated his achievements or wrote poetry for special occasions in his honor. During the first century, a number of patrons of literature went even further and helped some particularly gifted poets materially in a very substantial fashion, making it possible for them to dedicate themselves more or less fully to their art. For example, Gaius Maecenas (70–8 BCE), one of Augustus' close friends and counselors, played this role vis-à-vis Virgil,

Horace, and Propertius, and Augustus himself supported, among others, Virgil and Horace and exerted considerable, although mostly indirect, influence on the literature during his reign. Lucretius and Catullus lived too early to belong to the so-called Augustan age.

Very little credible information has been preserved about Lucretius as a person (Titus Lucretius Carus, c. 99–c. 55 BCE), and we only know about one work of his: *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*). This is a didactic hexameter poem in six books (7415 verses), which expounds the Epicurean view of the world. Lucretius offers a detailed explanation of the makeup of the physical world, from the demonstration in his first book of why it is obvious that everything is built up of atoms and empty space to the analysis of natural phenomena like thunderstorms and earthquakes in his sixth book, ending with a vivid description of the plague in Athens during the Peloponnesian War. The message at the heart of the poem is that men should be free of fear. They should be free of fear of the gods, who do exist, but in a state of repose and equanimity far from the earth, and who will (no matter what the Stoics say) neither harm nor help us. Men should also be free of fear of death, which simply represents the dissolution of the body and the soul (the soul exists, but it is also composed of atoms and dissociates when humans die). Lucretius is strongly critical of all religion that spreads the impression that men are at the mercy of the gods and may have to fear punishment and suffering in a life after death. Knowledge of the true nature of the world will disperse that fright.

There is nothing facile about Lucretius' poem. He is doing his best to present a coherent naturalistic view of nature (needless to say, his explanations of natural phenomena are sometimes grossly mistaken). Nor does his optimism, such as it is, appear to have been easily or safely acquired: readers tend to get the impression that the fears which Lucretius endeavors to allay are fears that he himself is very well acquainted with.

The connections with the Greek cultural tradition are still very strong and completely obvious in Latin first-century lyric poetry, but the best Latin poets also display much originality. In the case of Lucretius, his genre, the didactic hexameter epic, is of Greek origin – remember Hesiod – and was frequently used in postclassical Greek poetry – we have met it in the *Causes* by Callimachus. Moreover, the perspective on the world which Lucretius presents – his natural philosophy and his moral philosophy – is taken from the human hero of his poem, the Greek philosopher Epicurus, praised in several of the books, particularly in the third. Nevertheless, *On the Nature of Things* is in many ways a highly individual work of art. Epicurus wrote in prose and wanted to distance himself from poetry, especially from Homer and the Homeric view of the universe and the gods, so deeply familiar to all Greeks; in writing

philosophy in verse, Lucretius followed, rather, the Sicilian fifth-century thinker Empedocles. Where the didactic epic is concerned, Lucretius' strong engagement with truth is different from the Hellenistic manner of handling the genre – in Callimachus and others, what is prominent is rather the elegant exposition of learning and a detached attitude to the subject.

The whole idea of presenting natural science seriously in verse can seem not a little surprising, but Lucretius, with his patent poetic talent, obviously felt that a hexameter poem should prove a good form for the content, scientific and visionary at once, that he wanted to convey. He compares his strategy to smearing the rim of the cup with honey when giving medicine to a child. More poetically, he says that he makes a glorious garland for his head of flowers that the Muses never picked for such use before (translation by Sir Ronald Melville):

> *I know how dark these matters are*
> *But the high hope of fame has struck my heart*
> *Sharply with holy wand and filled my breast*
> *With sweet love of the Muses. Thus inspired*
> *With mind and purpose flourishing and free*
> *A pathless country of the Pierides*
> *I traverse, where no foot has ever trod.*
> *A joy it is to come to virgin springs*
> *And drink, a joy it is to pluck new flowers*
> *To make a glorious garland for my head*
> *From fields whose blooms the Muses never picked*
> *To crown the brows of any man before.*
> *First, since of matters high I make my theme,*
> *Proceeding to set free the minds of men*
> *Bound by the tight knots of religion.*
> *Next, since of things so dark in verse so clear*
> *I write, and touch all things with the*
> *Muses' charm.*

For Lucretius and his time, knowledge should not ultimately be just a structure of empirical insights but should ideally form part of a coherent, satisfactory perspective on the world, and if that perspective was also touched with the Muses' charm, so much the better.

The life of Catullus (Gaius Valerius Catullus; c. 84–c. 54 BCE) is slightly better known to us than that of Lucretius. Catullus came from a wealthy and locally influential family in Verona in Northern Italy but lived his short life mainly in Rome, where he seems to have moved among the aristocracy but also in a bohemian circle of young leisured upper-class men with sophisticated literary interests. Catullus and his

friends were probably the first Latin poets who thoroughly assimilated Hellenistic poetry and made it the foundation of their own writing. Catullus, for his part, could excel in complicated meters and advanced allusions, but he could also use relatively simple Greek meters like the elegiac distich or the hendecasyllables for short poems that address his friends in a familial and disrespectful, sometimes even highly obscene, manner, or satirize named contemporary Romans, or apostrophize his painfully inconstant female lover. His collected poems (116 or 117 in all, of which three are considered inauthentic) form a book which could be called a *satura* in the original Latin sense, a mixture of considerable diversity, coarse and polished at the same time. Specialists emphasize the quality of his few longer and more Hellenistic poems; nonspecialist readers tend to be most attracted by the irreverent personal voice in his shorter and more direct pieces.

A woman called Lesbia (a pseudonym) is at the center of a number of Catullan poems. Taken together, these texts tell a story of love awakened, fulfilled, and lost. One of the poems – the earliest one, some have presumed – is an adaptation of Sappho's famous poem about the god-like man sitting beside the beloved and about the radical physical impact on the poet of the sight of her. (The name Lesbia does, of course, point to Lesbos, Sappho's home island, firmly associated with love in European antiquity.) Catullus employs the original's minor Sapphic meter in his poem and follows Sappho very closely through the three stanzas that are preserved of her Greek text, but he ends with a remarkably unromantic reflection in a fourth stanza of his own (translation by Guy Lee):

> *Leisure, Catullus, does not agree with you.*
> *At leisure you're restless, too excitable.*
> *Leisure in the past has ruined rulers and*
> *Prosperous cities.*

The series of poems related to Lesbia contains lovers' talk, memories of past happiness, but also expressions of profound pain and dismay. One of Catullus' best-known poems is a bitter two-liner; in prose translation, it reads:

> *I hate and I love. Perhaps you ask why I do that.*
> *I do not know, but I can feel it happen and I am*
> *excruciated.*

The identity of Catullus' Lesbia is supposed to be known; she seems to have been a married woman from the highest nobility, known for her great beauty but surrounded by scandal. The biographical background as such is not of real interest in our context. It is notable, however, that

Catullus converts very personal real-world relationships into lyric subject matter and that passionate romantic love of a woman is being treated as something of profound importance by a male poet. Latin literature is typically an elite male concern, and romantic love enjoyed little prestige in the solidly patriarchal Roman society. Against that background, Catullus' anxiety about where indulgence in leisure and love might take him should be more understandable: a man was not supposed to develop that kind of profound and intimate dependence on a woman.

Catullus' poetry provided one of the most important starting points for the Roman love elegy, a genre not without its Greek forerunners but mainly a new development. Books of elegies centered on beloved women figuring under pseudonyms are at the heart of the works of Tibullus and Propertius, two of the major poets in the next generation (Albius Tibullus, c. 55–19 BCE; Sextus Propertius, 55/43–after 16 BCE). Tibullus and Propertius differ from Catullus in many respects, not least in their care not to disobey the dictates of good taste, a care much more pronounced during the Augustan age. Nevertheless, love occupies center stage in their texts. Emotional values of a purely private and personal nature had become important in Latin poetry.

All through the period with which we are dealing, the choice of meter is of crucial significance in Latin poetry; here, too, different meters possess their own, more or less definitely circumscribed, spheres of connotations. The meter of elegy is the elegiac distich, subtly different from the hexameter. Its building block, the elegiac distich itself, consists of two lines, a hexameter and a pentameter. (The structure of hexameter lines was presented above in connection with Homer.) The pentameter, forming the second line of the couplet, could be characterized as a doubly truncated hexameter: the third and sixth foot of the hexameter are each reduced to a single, long syllable, and a noticeable pause, a so-called caesura (marked "||" below), is introduced after the third foot. A pentameter line can consequently be built like this (or the long–short–short feet can be replaced with long–long ones):

*–uu* | *–uu* | – || *–uu* | *–uu* | –

Unlike the hexameter, which is a meter for broad exposition rolling on and on, the characteristic second line gives the elegiac distich a certain pointedness. In Greece, the elegiac distich was often used in inscriptions, for example, in inscriptions associated with graves. (The Greek word for inscription, *epigramma*, has given us our term "epigram," meaning a short, witty poem or statement.) Hence elegy, and the elegiac distich, had associations to the sorrowful – associations that a poet could activate. But the writer could also exploit other possibilities of the meter, like its capacity for epigrammatic density. The latter option is well illustrated

by the two-liner by Catullus quoted in a prose translation above. In the Latin original, the poem reads:

*Odi et amo. quare id faciam fortasse requiris?*
*nescio sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*

Its underlying metrical pattern is this (hexameter plus pentameter; the "i" of "Odi," the "e" of "quare," and the "o" of "sentio" disappear through elision: the first of the two colliding vowels remains unpronounced):

*–uu* | – – | *–uu* | – – | *–uu* | *–u*
*–uu* | *–uu* | – || *–uu* | *–uu* | –

If one attempts to offer a metrical translation into English (a translation building on stressed versus unstressed syllables and not, as in Latin, on long versus short syllables), the result can sound like this:

*Now I hate and I love; you may want to ask why*
*I do that.*
*I just know it is so, feeling the tormenting pain.*

– – | *–uu* | *–uu* | – – | *–uu* | *–u*
– – | *–uu* | – || *–uu* | *–uu* | –

An elegy in the classical Greek and Latin sense is a poem in elegiac distichs. Like the hexameter poem, the elegy is not divided into stanzas, but even a long elegy will differ from a hexameter poem through the characteristic pentameters, which will give the elegy metric variation and a softer quality, something of a rhythmically stopped undulation. The meter's capacity for accommodating pointedness and for integrating emotionality can also be exploited by the elegiac poet.

The epic was traditionally the most prestigious poetic form. Shorter types of lyric used to be held in less regard, particularly in Rome. However, influential poets in the postclassical Greek world, particularly Callimachus, put much stress on careful attention to every detail in a poem and favored shorter, highly polished forms. In Rome, Catullus and his circle exemplify this more recent tendency. The bringing together of one's poems into meticulously organized books, a phenomenon that became important and widespread in later first-century Rome, could be said to represent a kind of compromise: a major work comprised of poems of limited size.

Horace, like Catullus, preferred the relatively minor forms. Horace started out as a writer in the genre of satire in the 30s but went on, in the 20s, to compose and publish his *Carmina* (*Odes*) – lyrical poems

on philosophical themes, friendship, or love but also about political or societal matters – rich in allusions to classical poetry in Greek and in a variety of classical Greek meters. Horace regarded Alcaeus as a particularly important model, but many other Greek poets also served him as reference points. The Greek patterns provided a background and an inspiration for Horace's poetry, but they did not prevent him from developing an original poetic stance and a personal lyric style. In his later years, the focus of Horace's poetic art shifted once again, and he concentrated on reflective letters in verse (hexameters), a genre which he had more or less invented himself.

Horace's social background was relatively humble. His father, a former slave, worked as an assistant to an auctioneer and was also the owner of a farm. He must have been able to accumulate some wealth, for Horace was given a fine education: he was instructed by a well-known *grammaticus* in Rome and went on to studies of philosophy in Athens. In Greece, Horace became involved in the major political conflicts of the day. After the murder of Caesar, the leading assassins Brutus and Cassius had fled to Greece and sought support for the republican cause there; for a time, they were in control of Greece. The young Horace sided with the republicans and was given an important military post – he was made military tribune, something like a colonel, in one of Brutus and Cassius' legions. In that capacity, he was one of those who faced the armies of Caesar's successors, Mark Antony and Octavian, the future Augustus, in the catastrophic battles at Philippi in November 42. Horace escaped alive and could return to Italy and to Rome, even finding work in the Roman treasury, but his family farm and fortune were lost. Now Horace began to write poetry and embarked on a literary career. In the early 30s, his fellow author Virgil introduced Horace to Gaius Maecenas, who became his protector and also a personal friend. Maecenas offered Horace a house with a farm in the vicinity of Rome, a place the privacy of which came to mean much to the poet.

The relationship with Maecenas also conferred obligations on Horace. Having become the de facto head of state, Augustus endeavored to heal the wounds after the gruesome civil wars and to restore a foundation of traditional values in Roman society. Poetry was one of the ideological means by which he attempted to achieve this, and Maecenas supported the policies of his friend and leader, so a certain degree of intellectual conformity was no doubt expected from Horace. Yet Augustus appears to have been quite widely appreciated for his ability to create and maintain peace for the Roman Empire, and Horace may have had little wish to oppose his policies. The poet also managed to retain a degree of independence even when, with time, he entered into a closer relationship with Augustus. Thus, Horace declined an offer to serve as the personal secretary of Augustus; on the other hand, he composed a solemn hymn

that was performed at the Secular Games when these old religious ceremonies were revived by Augustus in 17 BCE.

Moral and philosophical interests are close to the heart of the poetry of Horace. His philosophy is mostly Epicurean; Horace describes fondly simple pleasures enjoyed together with friends, and his poems are typically directed to real or imagined addressees. He is vividly aware of the fleetingness of life and of the need to make the most of the passing moment. He is prepared to praise his benefactors or criticize vices, but preaching is not really his style: there is normally a tangible psychological distance, almost a kind of light irony, in his poems.

The *carpe diem* or "seize the day" theme is arguably fundamental to the perspectives on existence expressed in the poems. Time flies; you should make sure that you enjoy what life has to offer you today (translations from Horace by Jeffrey H. Kaimowitz):

> *dum loquimur, fugerit invida*
> *aetas: carpe diem quam minimum credula postero*
>
> *As we speak, begrudging time*
> *has fled. Seize the day – and trust tomorrow least.*

The *carpe diem* theme surfaces in many places in Horace, combined with other important themes and motifs. The Soracte ode, one of Horace's best-known texts, begins with a beautifully observed and rendered winter scene. The mountain Soracte outside Rome is seen from a distance, white, in deep snow and piercing cold. The woods cannot sustain the burden of the snow; the rivers stand still, frozen. Clearly, men must find a refuge from this winter world or share the fate of the woods and the rivers. The lyric speaker is indoors, accompanied by Thaliarchus, perhaps a slave boy, who is putting logs on the fire and serving generously of the wine of the country. Now the *carpe diem* theme is played out: the lyric addressee, apostrophized directly and described as young (Thaliarchus? A young friend? The reader?) is advised to make good use of the days that fortune admits him, and to take care to spend time on love and dancing.

> *Of what will be tomorrow, do not ask:*
> *whatever days that Luck provides account*
> *as gain, and, while a youth, don't spurn the*
> *sweet delights of love and dancing.*
> *as long as you are green, not peevish with*
> *gray hair.*

The speaker then goes on to end the poem with representations of flirting young courtship during city evenings at nightfall. There is both warmth

and distance in the tone and an underlying sincerity. The various scenes in the ode, some of them actual in the world of the poem and some merely imagined, are made vivid and concrete in memorably formed verse: the lightly sketched indoor scene; the delicate but strangely disengaged description of imagined young people's innocent courtship (remember that love is nothing more than a sweet delight); also the fine if chilling initial description of nature.

Another striking feature of Horace's poetry is his uncompromising dedication to poetry itself, to the careful chiseling of verses and the freshness and exactness of diction. One of his late epistles, the so-called *Ars poetica* (*Art of Poetry*), formally addressed to members of the Piso family, concerns, precisely, the art of poetry itself. Among Horace's many pieces of practical advice regarding the poet's craft, the need for polishing occupies an important place. A poem needs the work of the file. You should let your poem rest in your drawer for nine years before making it public. This is the new, Hellenistic and first-century Roman, insistence on artistic perfection.

Two of the most important poets of the Augustan age remain to be discussed: Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70–19 BCE) and Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 BCE–17 CE). Both are best known for large epics – Virgil's *Aeneis* (*Aeneid*) and Ovid's *Metamorphoseon libri* (*Metamorphoses*) – and both are excellent representatives of the aesthetic refinement of Augustan poetry, but in other respects, they illustrate, rather, diverging aspects of their times. Virgil, belonging to an older generation, had experienced the traumatic period of the civil wars as an adult. Those times were over when Ovid entered his teens; for him, the rich and elegant high society of peacetime Rome was the natural habitat. While both poets had much for which to thank supportive patrons, Ovid came from a wealthier and nobler family and could enjoy more independence. Most important of all, while Virgil aligned himself with Augustus' cultural and political program, Ovid never did much to support it. Virgil was a favorite with the emperor; Ovid ended up being relegated to an obscure town on the Black Sea coast through Augustus' personal intervention.

Virgil came from Northern Italy, from the countryside near Mantua, where his family were small landowners. Like Horace, he received a fine education in spite of his rather undistinguished background, but Virgil never made any serious attempt to start a military or legal career. He appears to have been a very private person, living for his poetry which, however, attracted the attention of important patrons. He was befriended by Maecenas and through him eventually entered into a direct association with Augustus. The hexameter was Virgil's favored mode of poetic expression, and unlike Horace and many others, he proved able to write epic poetry on a Roman national theme. After the end of the civil

wars and the return of Octavian/Augustus to Rome, a major epic celebrating the victor and peace-bringer was a natural and expected thing. Virgil was working on this semi-official epic, an undertaking in which Augustus himself took obvious interest, for the last decade of his life. The epic, the *Aeneid*, had still not received all its final touches when Virgil died – there were some unfinished verses, some probably unintended repetitions, and so on – and it is being said that Virgil wanted the manuscript to be burned, but that Augustus arranged for the epic to be made public.

In fact, Virgil only composed three works during his lifetime, not counting a number of smaller poems of disputed authenticity. His first book of poems, *Eclogae* (*Eclogues*, or *Bucolics*, completed c. 42–37 BCE), is a series of ten hexameter poems set in a rural, pastoral milieu, where shepherds or, in one of the songs, Silenus, the head of the satyrs, converse and sing. We have already touched on the genre of bucolic poetry in connection with the Hellenistic poet Theocritus and with Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*. The genre had never been popular in Rome, but Virgil, with his congenial rural background and his tendency to seclusion, was able to turn the idealized pastures into a magical space (yet reverberating with the echoes of distant dramatic events). The arrangement of the 10 poems is carefully considered; the *Bucolics* have been characterized as the first example in Rome of a collection of poems where the disposition is the result of conscious artistic design. Virgil's next work, completed around 10 years later, 30 BCE, was the *Georgica* (*Georgics*), a short didactic epic on agriculture, a theme possibly suggested by Maecenas. This means that Virgil once again remained in the rural sphere, this time in a somewhat timeless and abstract Italian setting. Despite the didactic form of the poem and the ensuing generalizing of its subject, the text has surprising depth and charm because of its closeness to nature in its many different manifestations.

After the *Georgics*, the *Aeneid* became Virgil's main literary concern. The *Aeneid* is an epic in hexameters and divided into twelve books. The work contains just below 10 000 hexameter lines; it is thus shorter than each of the two Homeric epics but somewhat longer than Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*. The *Aeneid* is set in the time immediately following the Trojan War. During the night that Troy falls and is set on fire, the Trojan hero Aeneas, known from the *Iliad* and the son of the goddess Aphrodite and the eminent Trojan Anchises, flees from the burning city together with his father, his son, and the images of the household gods; Aeneas' wife, however, disappears during their flight. A band of fleeing Trojans flock around Aeneas and they sail away. Through an oracle and a clairvoyant expatriate Trojan king, Aeneas learns that he is to found a colony in western Italy, past Sicily, in the region from which Dardanos, forefather of the Trojans, once came. Sailing toward Italy, Aeneas' little fleet is dispersed by a storm near Sicily but reunited in

Carthage, the Phoenician city in North Africa, ruled in the *Aeneid* by Dido, a widowed queen. Venus (Aphrodite in her Roman guise) arranges for a warm welcome in Carthage for the Trojans. Dido and Aeneas fall in love and enter into a social and sexual relationship resembling marriage, but Jupiter (Zeus) sends Mercurius (Hermes) to remind Aeneas of his duties and his destiny. Obeying the divine command, Aeneas abandons Carthage with his men and his ships, while the desolate Dido commits suicide by burning herself on a pyre; she prays that Aeneas' treason will be avenged. Aeneas reaches Italy and consults a new oracle: the Sibyl at Cumae near Naples, a priestess of Apollo. She makes it possible for Aeneas to visit the underworld, meet his now deceased father, see his descendants in coming generations, and learn about their future deeds. Arriving, finally, in Latium, Aeneas is amicably received by its king, Latinus, who is persuaded by an oracle to offer Aeneas his daughter Lavinia as a bride. This, however, infuriates another local king, Turnus, who had expected to marry Lavinia. Turnus and Aeneas each mobilize extensive support, and the latter part of the *Aeneid* is filled with battles. Finally, Aeneas prevails; the epic ends with the death of Turnus.

Augustus is glimpsed in the *Aeneid*; he is one of the spirits that Anchises points out to Aeneas during the visit to Hades in the sixth book of the epic (translations from Virgil by C. Day Lewis):

> *And here, here is the man, the promised one*
> *you know of –*
> *Caesar Augustus, son of a god, destined to rule*
> *Where Saturn ruled of old in Latium, and there*
> *Bring back the age of gold: his empire*
> *shall expand*
> *Past Garamants and Indians to a land beyond*
> *the zodiac*
> *And the sun's yearly path, where Atlas the*
> *sky-bearer pivots*
> *The wheeling heavens, embossed with fiery stars,*
> *on his shoulder.*

However, Virgil's epic as a whole praises Augustus more inventively and ingeniously than by extolling him as a person or recounting his military successes. The *Aeneid* glorifies Rome and Roman virtues by invoking Rome's ancient (legendary) past and the heroic efforts, worth emulating, that were required for the laying of its foundations. The cultural and at the same time political ambitions behind the attempted Augustan reformation of Rome could hardly have found more inspiring expression. Moreover, while the *Aeneid* is, in a way, a poem about a collective, a group of people, the prominence of the figure of Aeneas, the great

leader, makes itself felt throughout the work. It is also worth noting that, through his son Iulus, Aeneas will be the ancestor of the Julian family, the *gens Iulia*, to which Caesar belonged, and by adoption also Augustus.

The *Aeneid* is written in awareness of the whole Greco-Roman epic tradition. First and foremost, Virgil very consciously takes up and reworks elements from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, melting, as it were, the Homeric epics into his own new creation. The starting point of the *Aeneid*, Troy and the Trojan War, immediately invokes Homer. The first part of the *Aeneid*, the six books comprising the voyage from Troy to mainland Italy, is not without analogies to Odysseus' difficult and adventurous homeward journey, and the later six books, narrating the wars in Latium, form a kind of counterpart to the *Iliad*. In fact, allusions and conscious parallels or near-parallels abound. Just as the tale of the voyage is not told chronologically in the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* begins with the storm in the Strait of Messina (the place where Odysseus' party is supposed to have had a fateful encounter with the monsters Scylla and Charybdis). The earlier part of Aeneas' adventures is, instead, narrated by himself, at Dido's court, like Odysseus recounts his adventures to the Phaeacians and their king. In the *Odyssey*, a goddess (Athena) functions as the hero's divine helper; in the *Aeneid*, another goddess (Venus) has a corresponding role. Odysseus is able, in a famous scene, to call ghosts of the dead from the underworld and speak with them; Aeneas is allowed to actually enter the underworld and view both past and future spirits. On his journey toward Latium, Aeneas is delayed by Dido, much like Odysseus is held up by Calypso on his voyage toward Ithaca – and so on. Virgil cannot be said to borrow from Homer; instead, he is creating an epic in Latin that, in a manner, manages to incorporate Homer's epics, the most prestigious poetic creations in the Greco-Roman world. Virgil does this without irreverence and without showing off. There is a kind of elegant modesty in his limiting himself to twelve books – half of the 24 books of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*.

Just as little as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* is a triumphant poem. Aeneas is an outstanding warrior but a highly dutiful person and a softer and more sensitive man than any of the Homeric heroes. Sometimes, he is almost brooding; there is a discreet but unmistakable strain of sorrow in Virgil's epic. The *Aeneid* as a whole can be said to describe how the first foundations of Rome were laid and that task is presented as a highly exerting one: "So much effort did it take to found the Roman race"; *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*. Nor does the poem end on a celebratory note. Virgil does not in fact tell us anything at all about the life of Aeneas and his men after the victory over Turnus. Instead, Virgil lets his epic end with death, and thus on a slightly tragic note, even if the death is that of Turnus, a fierce but not ignoble enemy. Aeneas pierces Turnus with his sword, "and with a sigh life flees,

with resentment, into the shadows": *vitaque con gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras*. Virgil's epic, and his poetic work as a whole, ends with those shadows.

Ovid came from Sulmo (now Sulmona, a town in the present-day Abruzzo in eastern Italy) and received the typical Roman upper-class education of his time, studying in Rome and Greece. He was a precocious rhetoric and poetic talent, and his interest in poetry soon made him abandon the career in law and politics for which he was no doubt intended by his family. His first book of poems, *Amores* (*The Loves*), a collection of love elegies, was published when he was in his early twenties and probably written over a couple of years before that. For the next 20 years, love would remain Ovid's most important theme and the elegiac distich his typical meter. However, he departed from the conventions of the Roman love elegy by not adopting the role of the dedicated lover of a specific woman: Ovid wrote about love in a number of forms. Another early work of his is the *Heroides* (*Epistles of the Heroines*), a series of imagined verse-letters, mainly letters written by mythological women to their absent lovers: Penelope to Ulysses (Odysseus), Dido to Aeneas, etc.

Ovid was a productive and expansive writer, active in several genres – he even wrote a successful tragedy, *Medea*, now lost. Ovid obviously felt that he had the special talents needed for doing first-class work in the most respected literary forms, and when he was about 40 years old, he started composing the *Metamorphoses*, a hexameter epic which will soon be presented more fully. In this phase of his career, he also published *Ars amatoria* (or *Ars amandi;* called, in English, *The Art of Love*), his best-known work next to the *Metamorphoses*. *The Art of Love* is a didactic poem, but still in elegiac distichs – a meter associated, of course, with the theme of love – despite its "epic" character. In *The Art of Love*, Ovid teaches men how to win and keep the love of women, and he also offers corresponding advice to women in its final book. One cannot say that *The Art of Love* takes love seriously as a transforming personal experience; love is rather regarded as an emotional and sexual game promising considerable pleasure and distraction but also confronting the reader with the risk of becoming too involved for their own good. The tone could be called cynical, but Ovid is not a preacher, not even of cynicism; the somewhat detached attitude in the poem comes across as that of an experienced Roman man of the world. (Ovid himself was no doubt a Roman man of the world but also, by this time, married to his third wife in what appears to have been a good marriage.)

Ovid's life changed dramatically and unexpectedly when, in 8 CE, he was banished from Rome by Augustus and relegated to (forced to live in) Tomis, present-day Constanța, a port on the Black Sea in today's Romania. The immediate reason may have been some kind of misconduct or perceived misconduct on Ovid's part in connection with adultery

committed by Augustus' granddaughter Julia; it is also true, however, that works like *The Art of Love*, published a few years earlier, cannot have pleased the emperor, given his program of moral reform. The relegation was to last for the rest of Ovid's life, but he remained active as a poet, producing, particularly, the elegies contained in the two collections *Tristia* (*Sorrows*) and *Epistulae ex Ponto* (*Letters from the Black Sea*).

*The Metamorphoses* – completed at the time of Ovid's banishment, but never finally revised – is a hexameter poem in 15 books of nearly 12 000 lines altogether. The work contains a long series of mythological stories about transformations – we are told, for example, how the nymph Echo is transformed into a mere voice, or how an ivory statue of a beautiful young woman, sculpted by the Cyprian bachelor Pygmalion, becomes a woman of flesh and blood through the magic intervention of Venus. The stories – around 250 in all – are arranged in loose chronological order, beginning with how a god created the world as we know it out of chaos and ending with how Venus, on Jupiter's command, catches Caesar's soul at the moment of his murder, carries it up to the skies and places it there as a star. The passage from one story to the next can assume many forms – their themes can be similar, for example, or a story can lead to geographically or genealogically related stories – and the passage from one book to the next is often abrupt. The work as a whole can therefore make a dizzying impression, filled as it is with events and surprises and constant change. On the other hand, the individual stories are typically very clear, and their presentation invites vivid imagining.

The wealth of material makes the *Metamorphoses* into a kind of mythological treasury. At the same time, the geographic scope – a large number of specific localities across the empire figure in the epic – can make you feel that the *Metamorphoses* encloses the whole Mediterranean world, transporting it into an alternative, fantastic reality. There are certainly Greek genres behind the *Metamorphoses*, not only Greek narrative material. Hesiod's *Theogony* was built around a series of thematically related stories; Ovid's frequent occupation with (alleged) causes of phenomena (as in the story about Echo) was common in Hellenistic poetry, not least in Callimachus' *Causes*; there is even a lost hexameter poem in Greek focusing on stories of metamorphosis by the second-century poet Nicander. Like Virgil with the *Aeneid*, however, Ovid draws on well-known genres and traditional subject matter only to create a very personal new whole.

One of the many stories in the *Metamorphoses* is about Pyramus and Thisbe, two young people in Babylon living in neighboring houses, deeply in love but forbidden by their parents to marry. The two youngsters, communicating through a chink in the wall common to their two houses, agree to slip away one evening to meet under a mulberry tree at Ninus' tomb in the open country outside the city. Thisbe, the girl, arrives

there first, but she sees a lion in the moonlight and flees into a cave; in her flight, pieces of her clothing slip to the ground. The lioness, coming from a kill, slakes her thirst in a nearby well and then, on leaving, tears apart Thisbe's clothes with her bloody jaws. When entering the scene and nearing the mulberry tree under which they were to meet, Pyramus does not find Thisbe but only bloody clothes of hers, obviously torn asunder by a lion. Presuming her dead and accusing himself for causing her death, he kills himself with his sword. His blood spurts onto the mulberry tree, making its white fruits turn red. When Thisbe comes out of hiding, she sees the gruesome sight and understands what has happened; she seizes Pyramus' sword, still warm from his suicide, and also kills herself. Their parents bury the ashes of the two lovers in the same urn, and the fruit of mulberry trees henceforth has a dark red color – the latter transformation being the relevant metamorphosis here. Note that the story is also a story of a "cause," the cause of why (certain species of) mulberry trees have red fruits.

The dramatic (and melodramatic) story of Pyramus and Thisbe is narrated in a little more than a hundred hexameter lines, clearly and effectively, in a way that makes the scenes easy to visualize. At the same time, it is told with considerable formal artistry. These are its four opening lines:

> *Pyramus et Thisbe, iuvenum pulcherrimus alter,*
> *altera, quas Oriens habuit, praelata puellis,*
> *contiguas tenuere domos, ubi dicitur altam*
> *coctilibus muris cinxisse Semiramis urbem.*

In fairly literal prose translation:

> *Pyramus and Thisbe, the one the most beautiful of young men,*
> *the other surpassing all others among Oriental girls,*
> *lived in adjacent houses in the place where it is said that*
> *Semiramis surrounded the high city with walls made of baked bricks.*

The gist of this sentence is that Pyramus and Thisbe lived in adjacent houses in Babylon, but that central information is elaborated and adorned in various ways. The opening "Pyramus et Thisbe" ("Pyramus and Thisbe") is clear and direct enough. Then, however, Ovid comments on the beauty of the two lovers, and he does this by means of a complex, inserted qualification that takes up almost two lines. The inserted

qualification operates with a parallel but also with various contrasts: both Pyramus and Thisbe are described as being beautiful, but the descriptions are differently formed. The logical order in Pyramus' description is reversed in that of Thisbe (creating a "chiasmus," from "chi," the Greek word for the letter "X"): "iuvenum" (of young men) begins the description of Pyramus, which ends with "alter" (the one), while the description of Thisbe opens with "altera" (the other) and ends with "puellis" (among girls). The core description of Thisbe is also more complex, syntactically and semantically, than that of Pyramus ("quas Oriens habuit praelata puellis" versus "iuvenum pulcherrimus"). Then, after the relief of the simple "contiguas tenuere domos" (lived in adjacent houses), the complicated sentence goes on to end with an elaborate periphrasis making some (perhaps rather modest) demand on the cultural competence of Ovid's contemporary reader. Instead of simply placing the story "in Babylon," Ovid situates it "in the place where it is said that Semiramis surrounded the high city with walls made of baked bricks."

The acoustic aspect of the four lines is also important. The metrical feel of the four hexameter lines is subtly varied, not least through the variation in the number and distribution of spondees (the optional "long–long" verse feet that can be introduced into the basic dactylic, "long–short–short," pattern of the hexameter). Alliteration and assonance (similarities in sound) create additional artistically relevant effects. The repetition of stressed p's in the first two lines is a clear instance: "Pyramus ... pulcherrimus ... praelata puellis." One may also feel that the u's, i's (i/j's), and e's picked up from the names "Pyramus" and "Thisbe" make themselves particularly felt; they are the only vowels in a number of words: "et Thisbe, iuvenum pulcherrimus ... puellis ... tenuere ... ubi dicitur ... muris cinxisse ... urbem." Anyway, rhythm and sound have clearly not been left to chance.

The subtle manipulation of sound and sense is hardly the result of rational calculation; long rhetorical training and extensive poetic practice will have developed an intuitive sensibility in writers like Virgil and Ovid to the balance between too much and too little in the way of harmony and intricate variation. Such formal perfection was an important part of the aesthetic ideal behind Latin poetry during its most successful period, an ideal that has been succinctly described (by Dag Norberg) as the pursuit of "the elegant, noble, and artful."

## Latin Literature During the First Four Centuries CE

During the first century BCE, Latin literature successively acquired a new set of native classics, and these writers were felt to bear comparison with the best Greek authors. The most conspicuous of the new Roman classics were Virgil in poetry and Cicero in prose. As in the Greek-speaking

world after the fourth century BCE, the once established key classics were then never dethroned during our period. Several important authors were active and productive in Latin during the first centuries CE, and their textual output was spread across many genres. Yet it is as if the Roman literary-aesthetic ideal had, in reality, already been realized, and nothing was produced that was better than the now classical texts and little that was genuinely new and different. The breakthrough of Christianity would change the situation radically in the literary field too, but for a time Christians were just another minority group, practically powerless and sometimes persecuted.

The already existing textual forms and subject matters were naturally being adapted and reworked to fit the demands of a new historical situation. However, what was new in Roman society in comparison with the century before was above all the autocratic imperial rule and that rule was not, in effect, particularly favorable for literature. It was downright dangerous to be politically inopportune; flattery of the emperor, on the other hand, was both welcome and expected. Neither circumstance encouraged genuine creativity.

Where poetry is concerned, epic continued to be written, whether on historical themes, as in the *Bellum civile* or *Pharsalia* (*Civil War*) of Lucan (Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, 39–65 CE), a poem about the civil war between Caesar and his powerful opponent Pompey, or on mythological subjects, as in the *Thebais* (*Thebaid*) by Statius **(**Publius Papinius Statius c. 45–96 CE), built on a well-known myth about the war between two brothers contending for the throne in ancient Thebes in Greece. Statius also wrote lyric poetry, collected under the name *Silvae* (*Sketches*). Satirical poetry, always a popular Roman mode, was cultivated by Martial, known for his epigrams, and Juvenal (Marcus Valerius Martialis, born between 38 and 41, died c. 103 CE; Decimus Junius Juvenalis, possibly born in the 50's, died 127 CE or later). Drama, too, had its practitioners, most importantly Seneca (Lucius Annaeus Seneca, born c. 4 BCE, died 65 CE), often called Seneca the Younger, since his father, a famous authority on rhetoric, bore the same name.

Seneca's oeuvre consists mostly of stoically orientated philosophical prose – Seneca produced a large number of dialogues chiefly concerning moral philosophy – but we also have eight or nine tragedies considered to be written by him; even a tenth tragedy has sometimes been attributed to Seneca. These ten plays are in fact all the ancient Roman tragedies that still exist. Those definitely ascribed to Seneca are on traditional Greek mythological themes – there are, for example, a *Medea*, a *Phaedra*, an *Oedipus*, and an *Agamemnon*. These plays are verse dramas, with intricate meters in the choral parts, in five acts. More or less free adaptations of dramas by such authors as Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus, they also draw on other sources in the Greco-Latin tradition.

Seneca's plays are attuned to a partly different taste and partly different interests than their Greek models. In *Medea*, for example, no really fundamental changes have been made in the dramatic plot of Euripides' tragedy, but the main focus must be said to be on Medea's speeches – strong, sometimes vehement, emotional expressions – while the moral problems raised by the underlying story appear to carry less weight in the play. The upshot is a formally elegant and self-contained tragedy, dramatic and eloquent and sensational in content but perhaps more of a fascinating surface than the play by Euripides. Violence comes even more to the fore: in the final scene, Medea is standing on the roof of her and Jason's palace with the corpse of a son she has killed and a surviving son, scorning Jason, the boys' father, who is pleading with her down on the ground; she then kills their other son in Jason's plain view and hurls both bodies down to Jason. It is commonly assumed, however, that Seneca's tragedies were primarily meant for private and public reading, not for scenic performance.

Seneca made a political career, but one full of obstacles, during the difficult times under the early emperors Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Seneca had been the private teacher of Nero (who lived 37–68 CE and was emperor 54–68), and he played a very prominent role while the emperor was still young. Eventually, however, Seneca fell out of favor with Nero and, in 65 CE, he was forced by the emperor to commit suicide. The same destiny befell Lucan, who was Seneca's nephew, in the same year; they were both accused of having been involved in a conspiracy against Nero.

A third victim was the former consul Petronius (Titus Petronius Niger, died 66 CE), called Petronius Arbiter because he functioned as Nero's *arbiter elegantiae*, his counselor in matters of taste. Petronius chose to kill himself in an elaborate and deeply original fashion: opening and then bandaging his veins in order to bleed to death slowly, he committed suicide while having dinner with friends and preparing his final business. He is said to have left behind a testamentary letter detailing the many secret misdeeds of the probably deranged Nero. Petronius Arbiter is commonly identified with the Petronius mentioned as the author of the novel *Satyricon*.

*Satyricon* has been preserved only in parts, and the overall story line cannot be fully reconstructed. The novel is a narrative in prose, and in some places in verse, about a small group of men who travel from place to place, mostly in southern Italy, and lead an irregular and parasitic existence. The main character, Encolpius, functions as the narrator. Initially, Encolpius is accompanied by a young man, Giton, who is his lover, and by his friend Ascyltos, who competes with him for Giton's favors; Ascyltos' place in the company is later taken over by an old poet, Eumolpus. Sex, violence, and deception figure prominently and explicitly in the story, but the tone is satirical and without seriousness: *Satyricon* is a

string of bizarre situations and drastic events that put all those involved in a bad light. The deeper cause of Encolpius' vagrant life appears to be that he has angered Priapus, a fertility god whose main attribute is his colossal penis, and Priapus now persecutes Encolpius – one of several parodic allusions in the novel to the roving about of Odysseus, persecuted by Poseidon. Indeed, irony and parody are everywhere in *Satyricon* – directed at old orators, at epic poetry, at provincial society, and at much else besides. The novel's best-known episode is "Trimalchio's banquet," the description of a long and tortuous dinner hosted by Trimalchio, an extremely rich and utterly vulgar freedman with poetic pretensions. Some have seen a veiled reference to Nero here.

Overall, Latin prose appears to have been more truly creative than Latin poetry during the first four centuries CE, and rhetoric, supplying the models for verbal composition, still held the same central position in the educational program. Quintilian (Marcus Fabius Quintilianus; 35–after 96 CE), the foremost teacher of rhetoric of his time and the first Roman to obtain a state professorship, wrote a comprehensive presentation in twelve books of what he considered the best system for training a young person to achieve mastery in public speaking, *Institutio oratoria* (*Training of the Orator*). In his tenth book, Quintilian reviews the Greek and Latin authors most important for the aspiring orator to read; his discussion forms itself into a condensed survey and evaluation of Greek and Roman oratory, poetry, and history.

Public political debate had in practice ceased to exist under the new imperial system of government. Those who wanted to enjoy really good speeches now had to turn to the law courts, where advocates still relied very much on their oratorical skills, to official occasions like funerals, or to the performances of visiting star orators. In the latter context, the speeches by the renowned rhetors – who were normally Greek, and normally also famous teachers – might have an instructional purpose but often functioned first of all as virtuoso specimens of oratorical art. Depth of learning was a sine qua non for such speakers, and many of them excelled in archaism, taking fifth-century and fourth-century Athenian authors as their models. Many teachers of this art liked to refer to themselves as sophists, and the whole movement, which was quite influential in second-century Rome, is known as the "Second Sophistic."

We have touched on philosophy (Seneca) and oratory. History writing had an impressive representative in Tacitus (Publius, or Gaius, Cornelius Tacitus, 56–c. 120 CE). Tacitus, coming from the provincial upper classes, made a distinguished administrative and military career – consul in 97 and proconsul of Asia 112–113 – and wrote two extensive, partly preserved, works on Roman history covering the early imperial period from Augustus' death in 14 CE to the death of the Emperor Domitian in 96: *Cornelii Taciti ab excessu divi Augusti* (*Annals*) and *Historiae* (*Histories*), the

latter an earlier work, but dealing with the later parts of the period. Using his extensive experience of Roman politics and Roman administration, Tacitus sought a deeper interpretation of the new situation created by the introduction and solidification of the empire. Besides being an excellent advocate and orator and the author of a dialogue on oratory, Tacitus is also famous for a presentation and discussion of the Germanic tribes, *De origine et situ Germanorum* (*Germania*), one of very few Roman works containing a strong ethnographic element – Roman curiosity about non–Greco-Roman cultures appears to have been very limited. Suetonius (Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, 69–after 122 CE) offers another take on early imperial history with his verbal portraits of the rulers from Caesar to Domitian in *De vita Caesarum* (*Lives of the Caesars*).

One slightly later emperor, Marcus Aurelius (Marcus Annius Verus / Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, 121–180) left behind a late work called, in English, his *Meditations*. This is a comparatively loose collection of mixed remarks – general or autobiographical reflections, but most of all exhortations to himself – that was probably never intended to be made public. It conveys the image of an upright and troubled Roman ruler steeped in Stoic moral philosophy. The *Meditations* was actually written in Greek, an example of the lasting importance of Greek culture in Rome, not least in philosophical contexts. Its traditional Greek and Roman names mean, rather, "To himself": *Ta eis heauton*; *Ad se ipsum*.

As the example of Petronius' *Satyricon* demonstrates, Latin prose could now also include fiction besides more traditional types of writing such as oratory, history, or philosophy. We only have one more ancient novel in Latin, however, the well-preserved *Asinus aureus* (*Metamorphoses*, or *Golden Ass*), in eleven books, by Apuleius (Lucius Apuleius, c. 124–after 170 CE). Its male protagonist, Lucius, who is also the novel's narrator, goes on a business trip to Hypata in Thessaly in northern Greece. He has heard tales of the female magicians of Hypata from people he met on his way, and in Hypata, he finds that Pamphile, the wife of the business acquaintance with whom he is staying, is one of those practitioners of magic. Lucius has an affair with the female servant of the house, Photis, who assists Pamphile and knows much about her magic unguents, and he persuades Photis to let him see how Pamphile transforms herself into an owl. Photis even lets Lucius try the transformation himself, but because of a slipup, he is instead turned into an ass. Photis assures Lucius that eating fresh roses will restore his human form, but before fresh roses can be had, Lucius is stolen by a band of robbers. His various adventures as an ass take him south to Corinth, where the Egyptian goddess Isis shows herself to him in a dream, instructing him how to finally procure the necessary roses. Transformed back to human shape, the thankful Lucius becomes a follower of Isis and initiated into her cult and, after having traveled on to Rome, into the cult of Osiris, Isis'

brother and husband. When we leave Lucius at the end of the novel, he is serving as a religious official in Rome.

Just like the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* tells a considerable number of smaller or larger tenuously interlinked stories (sometimes, indeed, stories about transformations), whether presented as shorter adventures experienced by Lucius himself or as inserted narratives told by other characters in the novel. Many of these subordinate narratives concern magic, many are erotic, and some are scurrilous. One of the inserted stories occupies a very special position because of its length and its poetic content: the story of Cupid (Eros, the god of love) and the princess Psyche. Psyche lives in a splendid palace surrounded by servants and luxuries, but she is married to a very secretive creature: her more and more beloved husband only visits her at night in her bed, and he has strictly forbidden her to attempt to see him. One night she neglects his prohibition, lights an oil lamp while he is sleeping, and perceives not the monster she feared to find but the beautiful god of love with dewy, soft, white wings, a hairless rosy body and, on the floor, his bow, quiver, and arrows. Clinging to him and kissing him passionately she spills a drop of hot oil on him and he wakes up. Cupid tells her that she has now lost him and flies away. The desolate Psyche wanders everywhere, searching for him in vain. Finally, however, and after a number of trials, the gods have mercy on her, bring her up to Mount Olympus and make her immortal.

The story of Cupid and Psyche offers a kind of parallel to the main narrative in the novel: in both cases, we are shown how curiosity can produce disaster but also, after trials, lead to deeper contact with the divine. Despite the often comic and drastic content of its subordinate stories, the novel as a whole must be said to endorse belief in magic and mystery religion or at least in the worship of Isis. At the very opening of the novel Lucius, on his way to Hypata, meets two men who are arguing about the truth of the fantastic stories one of them is narrating. Without hesitation Lucius sides with the storyteller and rebukes the man who complains: "Because your ears are deadened and your mind is closed," says Lucius, "you are contemptuous of reports that may well be true. Heavens, man, you aren't too bright in your quite perverse belief that all that seems unfamiliar to the ear, or unprecedented to the eye, or even too hard for our thoughts to grasp, is to be accounted lies. Investigate such features a little more carefully, and you will find that they are not merely open to discovery, but are also easily performed" (translations from Apuleius by Alan H. Sommerstein). Then Lucius goes on to tell the two men about some entirely unbelievable incidents that he allegedly witnessed himself in a tavern a few days before. This episode helps set the tone of the *Metamorphoses*: the novel is never fully serious except, it appears, at its surprisingly pious end, but still there seems to be an underlying agenda below its entertaining surface.

Apuleius was born in Madauros in present-day Algeria, just like the Lucius of the novel turns out to be. Apuleius was educated in Carthage and in Athens, and he is known not only for the *Metamorphoses* but also for philosophical treatises in the Platonic tradition of the time and for speeches, particularly for an elaborate and apparently successful speech in his own defense, held before a court in a city in today's Libya where he stood accused of practicing magic. Apuleius was, in fact, an exponent of the Second Sophistic. It is impossible to know how he himself thought of his *Metamorphoses* and how he valued his novel when compared with his considerable philosophical and oratorical oeuvre.

Ending the discussion of ancient Greek and Roman literature with Apuleius is not without a point: in his person and his life, Apuleius illustrates how the Greek and the Roman, and the north and south of the Mediterranean, were closely interwoven not only politically but also when you look at the Greco-Roman literary world. Ending with a novel, on the other hand, illustrates that classicism did not reign supreme in that literary world in the early Common Era. It is true that the novel as a genre can hardly be said to have existed for that world itself – not only was there no name for such a genre, as we pointed out earlier apropos of the novels in Greek, but there was probably no consciousness of long fictional stories in prose as a specific type of text that might be considered to be a genre of its own and given a name. Apuleius himself described his text, rather, as composed of what was called Milesian stories – apparently, brief and burlesque narratives – for he lets his narrator declare that he intends to "weave together different tales in this Milesian mode of story-telling."

There is no evidence of Apuleius being familiar with Petronius' *Satyricon*, and the two Roman novels are also rather different from their Greek counterparts. The Greek novels are, typically, stories about love with many complications, love that is finally rewarded with a happy outcome, and they are told in the third person by a narrator outside the story. The two Roman ones, not very similar to one another, are first-person novels where the protagonist is speaking, and even if love, or at least sex, is a prominent theme in both texts, the tone is most often irreverent and the possible deeper concerns are, seemingly, social satire (Petronius) or magic and religion (Apuleius).

## Writing, Reading, and Literary Thought in Greco-Roman Culture

Our historical overview of Greek and Latin literature before 400 CE is concluded, but a few words about writing, reading, and literary thought in Greco-Roman literary culture will add some relevant features to the historical picture.

As we saw, the Greeks lost writing with the disappearance of the so-called Linear B and acquired a system of writing anew from the Phoenicians, probably around 1000 BCE. The Phoenician alphabet was quite modern for its time. More ancient systems of writing had relied on pictures of the items designated, and/or designations of sounds or combinations of sounds, and had typically also made use of additional signs for disambiguation. An alphabet, where a specific sign stands for a specific sound, is something very artificial when considered from the point of view of living speech, but alphabets are simpler systems to use, since they require far fewer signs. The Phoenician alphabet consisted, in principle, of signs for consonants, but the Greeks added signs standing for vowels, putting Phoenician consonant-signs that were not needed in Greek to a new use. The introduction of designations of vowels marked yet another improvement because it made the script easier to read. Several earlier cultures – notably those of Egypt and Mesopotamia – had had to educate specialists, scribes, to master their complex scripts. When the Greek alphabet was used, or such adaptations of it as the Latin alphabet and, later, the Cyrillic alphabet, extensive specialist training was unnecessary.

Writing materials and techniques varied in European antiquity. Writing on wax tablets occurred in many everyday contexts, for example, in schools or in households, where wax tablets functioned as exercise books or notebooks. A wax tablet is a wooden slate with a wax surface on which one writes with a hard, pointed object (a *stylus*, giving us the word "style"); the text can then be rubbed out and the wax tablet reused. Several wax tablets could be tied together, which produced something like a "book" with "pages." The book in the modern sense, the *codex* with its Latin name (in plural, *codices*) – sheets of some material, bound or stitched or glued together at one edge – was in fact also in existence, but played a subordinate role. Paper was invented by the Chinese toward the end of our period, but it would take many centuries before paper came to Europe. *Codices* could, however, be made of papyrus or of parchment (processed skins of animals like sheep or calf).

Papyrus rolls were invested with more prestige than wax tablets and were the prime carriers of written texts. Papyrus is a writing material made from the pith of the Egyptian papyrus plant. If one puts strips of the pith besides each other vertically, covers them with another set of strips placed horizontally, and applies pressure, the two layers will glue together and become a sheet of papyrus, typically fabricated more or less square, fit for writing on. Separate sheets, normally around 20, can then be glued together to form a long strip of papyrus, a papyrus roll. The name "roll" is motivated by the fact that papyrus sheets tend to roll together so that the whole strip can be made to form a roll. The "inside" of the roll is the one primarily used for writing. One reads a papyrus roll by holding it up horizontally with both hands, unrolling it with

one's right hand and rolling it up with one's left. Papyri are relatively sensitive, and it was wise to keep one's papyrus rolls stored in book-boxes or wrapped up in protective parchment. If properly cared for, papyrus rolls could survive for centuries in dry climates, but they were ultimately bound to perish. Larger or smaller fragments of texts on papyrus are still being recovered from the Egyptian deserts, but texts written on papyrus are, by and large, irretrievably lost unless they were copied onto parchment when the codex took over as the major medium for the preservation of texts toward the end of our period.

Inscriptions on papyrus were divided into separate "pages" or "columns" (called *paginae* in Latin) going from left to right. Each successively unrolled "page" consisted of a number of lines about 15–25 letters wide. The whole roll constituted a book (these are the "books" referred to above in connection with Homer, Livy, the *Aeneid*, etc.). Since copies were produced manually and not mechanically – the first exemplar was written by hand by the author or perhaps dictated by him to one of his literate slaves, while subsequent copies were produced, precisely, through copying – each inscribed papyrus roll was, to some extent, individual and unique in its appearance. Copying errors were frequent.

There were no publishers and no copyright in the Greco-Roman world during our period. You "published" your text as soon as you made it possible for others to copy it or, perhaps, presented relevant persons with a copy of your work yourself. You had no right to your text, except a purely moral one, either before or after making your work public. You could not, as an author, sell your text. If you wanted to make money from your career as an author, you had to rely on patronage or on fees from public readings.

Even after the purely oral era, oral-aural transmission of texts retained a privileged position. It has been said that "throughout antiquity books were written to be read aloud, and ... even private reading often took on some of the characteristics of a modulated declamation" (E.J. Kenney). This fact is of some significance for understanding Greek and Roman literature: sound and rhythm remained important concerns in both poetry and prose.

Reading presupposes access to a text. Perhaps you could turn to a friend to borrow an exemplar of the text you wanted to read, possibly taking the opportunity to copy the text in the process (or let one of your slaves copy it for you). There were libraries in many cities during the later parts of our period – culturally important cities like Rome, Alexandria, Pergamum, and Athens could pride themselves on really fine libraries – and texts could also be bought from booksellers.

Texts were not only written and read but also interpreted in schools and commented on by specialists. The experts associated with the Mouseion in Alexandria were pioneers in textual criticism – given the problematic

copying process, establishing authoritative texts of culturally important works, particularly the Homeric epics, had assumed high priority. Furthermore, the study and teaching of oratory and poetry resulted in the formation of an impressive apparatus of terms and concepts for stylistic devices, from such relatively well-known ideas as "metaphor" and "periphrasis" to less familiar notions like "hendiadys" (pleonastic constructions like "well and good") or "polyptoton" (the repetition of a word in different cases or inflections within the same sentence, as in "My own heart's heart"). Various figures and tropes and their stylistic effects are skillfully discussed by writers like the otherwise unknown Demetrius, author of the ambitious work *Peri hermeneias* (*On Style*; possibly second century BCE).

Commentators today tend to find most Greek and Roman literary criticism myopic, since the Greek and Roman critics mainly focused on textual detail rather than overall aesthetic structure. The textual interpretation that was going on in schools all over the Greco-Roman world concerned first of all questions relating to vocabulary and semantic understanding, metrics, figures and tropes, mythology, the reference of geographical names, and so forth, sometimes perhaps the expressiveness of particular passages. Literary criticism seldom set itself higher goals. The original and fundamental reflection on poetry comprised in some of Plato's dialogues and in Aristotle's *Poetics* had no real counterpart in later Greco-Roman literary culture; Horace's verse-letter about the art of poetry only offered elegantly formulated practical advice. It is true that a plea for poetic grandeur and beauty rather than polished and correct mediocrity is made in the treatise *Peri hypsous* (*On the Sublime*), ascribed to a certain Longinus and probably written in the first century CE. "Look at life from all sides," says Longinus, "and see how in all things the extraordinary, the great, the beautiful stand supreme, and you will soon realize what we were born for. So it is by some natural instinct that we admire, not the small streams, clear and useful as they are, but the Nile, the Danube, the Rhine, and above all the Ocean" (translation by W.H. Fyfe, revised by Donald Russell).

Speaking of "literary criticism," it is worth pointing out that Greco-Roman culture did not have a concept of literature. The Latin word *litteratura* did exist, but its root meaning is simply literacy, the knowledge of letters. The Greeks and Romans certainly possessed a large number of genre concepts, and also the more general concept of poetry (Greek *poiesis*, Latin *poesis*), but poetry was generally defined as being metrical discourse. As Aristotle observed, with characteristic acuity, "the art which uses either plain language or metrical forms (whether combinations of these, or some one class of metres) remains so far unnamed" (translation by Stephen Halliwell; it may be fair to say that Aristotle himself had, or envisaged, a concept of literature). When Quintilian surveys the most excellent Greek and Roman writers in the tenth book of his *Training of the Orator*, his principle of inclusion is not literary

writers as opposed to non-literary writers, but "authors worthy of our study" as opposed to those not deserving to be read by us (translations from Quintilian by H.E. Butler), no matter whether the authors worth being attended to had produced poetry, history, philosophy, or oratory.

It is also important, apropos of literary thought, not to forget about the great significance of oratory. Oratory was the supreme art of the word in Greco-Roman culture, and rhetoric attracted more attention and theoretical thought than poetics. In the fifth century BCE, Gorgias eloquently described the impact of the spoken word – "Speech is a powerful lord that with the smallest and most invisible body accomplishes most god-like works. It can banish fear and remove grief and instil pleasure and enhance pity" – and he subsumed poetry under speech as "speech having metre" (quoted after George A. Kennedy). Five hundred years later, Quintilian makes the fascination of oratory palpable by describing for us the impact that the successful orator has on his audience:

> *The speaker stimulates us by the animation of his delivery, and kindles the imagination, not by presenting us with an elaborate picture, but in bringing us in touch with the things themselves. Then all is life and movement, and we receive the new-born offspring of his imagination with enthusiastic approval. We are moved not merely by the actual issue of the trial, but by all that the orator himself has at stake.*

## Concluding Remarks: Greco-Roman Literary Culture in a Wider Perspective

We have underlined repeatedly that Greek and Roman literature was never European in its reach nor ever limited to geographical Europe. In its heyday, Greco-Roman literary culture was, rather, Mediterranean literary culture, spread across Southern Europe, westernmost Asia, and northernmost Africa. In many areas where other languages were largely spoken, Greco-Roman literary culture was an elite culture rather than the culture of the society at large. This was true of western Asia, northern Africa, and the northern and north-western frontier regions in Europe, areas linguistically dominated by such languages as Iranian, Aramaic, Egyptian, Phoenician/Punic, Celtic languages, and Germanic languages.

In this chapter, we have been dealing with a period of more than 1000 years, from the eighth century BCE to the fourth century CE. Literature in Greek was represented throughout this period; literature in Latin only from the third century BCE onwards. Although intertwined,

Greek and Latin literature never really merged and neither did the two languages. Greek literature remained largely uninfluenced by Latin literature, while Rome assimilated much of Greek literary culture, little by little creating a counterpart in Latin with its own classics and emphases.

The earliest poetry in Greek, from the eighth to the fifth centuries, possessed a different character from what was to follow. Ancient Greek poetry was oral: the epics, the lyric poems, and the dramas were all meant for oral performance and functioned within a society in which writing was known but was secondary to speech as a medium for public discourse. Lyric poems were composed for small groups of intimates – even though they might later become widely known – but that was not how poetry was most conspicuously used. The epics of Homer; the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes; and the odes of Pindar were all publicly performed to large audiences in socially and religiously significant contexts. The importance of poetry in these different genres was great, even though the character of that importance may be difficult to pin down. A repository of religious and mythical knowledge, a vehicle for entertainment and intellectual reflection, a way of strengthening of communal ties – poetry will, in practice, have displayed many aspects and taken on many roles.

The breakthrough of writing in literary contexts in Greece took place from the middle of the fifth to the middle of the fourth centuries BCE. As in many other orally centered societies, the anonymous and abstract medium of writing was initially sometimes regarded with suspicion, and writing could be felt to compare unfavorably with the directness and authority and authenticity of the spoken word – in Plato's dialogue *Phaidros* (*Phaedrus*), Socrates is allowed to voice incisive criticism of writing. Nevertheless, the success of writing was comparatively swift and consequential; Aristotle is known to have built up a considerable institutional library at the Lyceum.

The deeper penetration of writing affected literary culture in several ways. Not least, it opened new possibilities for the creation and diffusion of ambitious texts in prose: one can hardly successfully transmit or recreate a long discursive text in prose orally, while it is entirely feasible to orally transmit or recreate a long epic, aided by poetic form. Philosophy and history grew in importance; oratory, too, benefited from the attention to detail that writing made easier. At the same time, the city-state, the milieu where poets had expressed and affected the feelings and convictions of an autonomous congregation of free males, lost greatly in importance in the Hellenistic period with its much larger and more autocratic political structures. The earliest stage of Greco-Roman literary history, that of the basically oral poetry of the independent Greek city-states, came to an end.

With the new role of writing from the fourth century BCE onwards, the literature that has been preserved has a more learned character and is more of a concern for the elite, even though decidedly oral-aural genres like drama and oratory can be mentioned as exceptions, and a genre like the Greek novel may have had a wider circulation. Writing poetry or ambitious prose was also, predominantly, a male concern. Women were more or less deprived of formal education, particularly in the Greek world. Female writers are scarce in Greco-Roman literary culture, and Sappho is its only female author of really great significance.

Nevertheless, Greco-Roman literary culture represents a new type of literate literary culture in comparison with those of ancient Egypt and ancient Mesopotamia. The circle of literate people was much wider – although the distribution of literacy is difficult to estimate with any certainty – and sustained many different genres of ambitious writing, often wholly emancipated from royal or religious exigencies.

Greco-Roman literary culture around 400 CE had closer counterparts in other contemporaneous well-developed literary cultures, for example, in Sanskrit culture and in Chinese culture. The wider literacy, the more impressive gamut of genres, and the larger independence of the state and the temples are features shared by them all. Sanskrit literary culture also had the Indo-European background in common with the Greeks and the Romans, and this may well be behind the importance of epic poetry in both regions. However, various other traits distinguish Sanskrit literary culture from the Greco-Roman, not least the centrality of religious literature in India and the more ascetic and otherworldly character of Indian religions. Chinese literary culture may be closer to Greek and Roman by being more secular. Where the genres of accomplished writing are concerned, however, Chinese and Western traditions differed considerably, expository prose and lyric poetry occupying center stage in China while oratory, epic, and drama were the most prestigious types of verbal art in the West. Still, the structural parallels between Greco-Roman, Sanskrit, and Chinese literary cultures around 400 CE, and the fact that they all represent more recent and complex types of literary culture, deserve to be pointed out.

In its own eyes, however, Greco-Roman literary culture was no doubt unparalleled. The Roman Empire saw itself, to all intents and purposes, as representing the world, at least the civilized world, even if India and China were, in principle, known to the Romans. Consequently, the Greeks and Romans did not perceive of alternatives to their major genres or to the standards of excellence in writing established by their great authors, rhetors, and critics.

Adopting still another perspective, that of posterity, one may ask what Greco-Roman literary culture before 400 CE has meant for the literature of Europe in later times. The answer must be that for a long time

its importance was great, or even paramount, but that its role is much more diffuse today.

Latin eventually developed into a number of different vernaculars – Italian, Spanish, French, and others – but lived on as the language of learning in Western Europe and as the language of the fundamentally important Roman Catholic Church. The significance of Latin eroded with time, particularly from the eighteenth century onwards, but up until at least around 1900, all educated Western Europeans could be expected to have studied Latin at school. As in Roman times, the reading and interpreting of Latin classics formed a core element of such studies. Although remaining a living language, Greek found itself in a weaker position. Unlike the Western Church, the Orthodox Church, originally Greek, accepted the use of local languages in religious ritual, so Greek never came to occupy a position in Orthodox Eastern Europe similar to that of Latin in the West. Also, from 1453 and for a long time to come, the Greeks were subjects of the Ottoman Empire. However, the study of Greek was eagerly pursued in learned circles in Western Europe from around the fifteenth century onwards, and Greek, too, became a traditional element of advanced Western European education, even though Greek always remained second to Latin.

Against this background, it is understandable that Greco-Latin literary culture left a huge imprint on later literary traditions in Europe. First of all, learned men continued to write in Latin; well into the nineteenth century, highly educated people might take pride in their ability to compose ambitious poetry in Latin. Second, literature in the main Western European vernaculars was mostly created by authors steeped from school in Greco-Latin literary culture so that Greek and Latin literature inevitably played an important role in their works. Third, some important movements in European literary thought considered Greco-Latin literature to represent an unsurpassed model of literary excellence. Such classicism was prominent during the so-called Renaissance in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries – the French word *renaissance* means "rebirth" and refers to the sought-for rebirth of the arts and sciences of classical European antiquity – and also in seventeenth-century France, and, under French influence, in most of Europe during the eighteenth century. However, the rise of the bourgeoisie to economic, political, and intellectual power during the nineteenth century meant that new, differently orientated movements came to hold sway also in the literary world, movements like Romanticism and Realism.

In Europe today, the Greco-Latin literary heritage is certainly viewed with respect and with some measure of cultural pride, but it can hardly be said to represent a living literary force. Greek and Latin literature functions, rather, as part of the large storehouse of themes and forms

and literary lore available to authors for adaptation to new functions in new contexts in a new time. Only a small number of Greek or Latin works are read or encountered outside of learning environments – particularly perhaps certain dramas by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; some poems by Sappho; a play like Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*; Homer's *Odyssey*; some dialogues by Plato; or the *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius. It is a remarkable and intriguing fact that a small group of ancient texts from the basically oral phase of Greek literary culture appears to fare better in present-day Europe than most of later Greek or Latin literature.